

INTERVIEW WITH RORY CHASE

BY SETH KAHAN

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In San Francisco, at the Braintrust 2003 knowledge summit, Seth Kahan interviewed Rory Chase about trends in the knowledge field and his view on the contribution of storytelling. Rory is Managing Director of Teleos, which conducts the internationally recognized Most Admired Knowledge Enterprises - MAKE - research program. More information about both Rory and Seth is located at the end of the text.

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Seth: Rory, as someone who is familiar with major advances in knowledge management on a global scale, where are we?

Rory: If you look at the history there was focus on people and cultures initially. Then in the late 1990s, because of questions on efficiency, effectiveness, and IT becoming more accessible, there was a greater dependency on the use of various software tools and techniques used for collection and transfer. We're now looking back to the people issues, bringing in cognitive and social scientists. The other thing that is interesting is that academia has trailed this quite a bit. If we look toward research programs going on, especially the multi-disciplinary programs, we're going to see some interesting thinking.

There's a certain level of maturity in the field. This concept of "knowledge management" is an oxymoron. It makes it difficult to convince somebody at the top. They might say, "Well, it's a fuzzy term. I can't easily define what it is we're talking about." There may be some thinking in terms of re-branding. What is it that we're really doing? Is this actually innovation? Is this actually addressing workplace organization to free the individual to work within a different collaborative environment? It's more than a philosophical question. We need to answer the question, "How does one plot the direction of this evolution now?"

Seth: You've done a lot of work in terms of setting up a framework for knowledge management. You have much of this on your website, which is very helpful. While it is true that the term, knowledge management, is ambiguous and people have expressed discomfort with it, it is also true that it has denoted a particular set of activities. The things you are mentioning seem so wide ranging. how will we maintain focus as we go through this evolution?

Rory: This will be difficult because, by its nature, knowledge management brings in many disciplines. We've got anthropologists, cognitive scientists, behavioral scientists, and specialists in learning. It's too broad for any one group to control. This is a result of many of the early consulting companies. They set up their own knowledge management

departments, like IBM and KPMG. They found it was more than just a simple model or a set of tools and techniques.

By the late 1990s knowledge management practices were merged into change and transformation practices, business and logistics practices. There was recognition that this wasn't sufficient. Other disciplines needed to be brought in. The question became, "How do we transform the way our organization does its business activity?" Change mechanisms were required. If you look at many of the MAKE organizations, they used knowledge management as the change mechanism. They might have called it other names, but it was the mechanism by which they achieved tremendous change.

In some ways the western world has a difficulty with the paradox of "either/or" and "and/nor." Some of the Asian countries and companies will have a lead on us for awhile. They live with paradox. As a result, certainly from the MAKE research, we're seeing a large number of Asian based companies starting to take innovative initiatives. There's going to be a learning opportunity coming from the east in terms of how they're viewing these tensions between the individual and the collective, between requirements for private space and space in which you're linked 24 hours a day through a wired world. These are the tensions that organizations and cultures need to address. There will be opportunities for a greater sharing of those insights.

Seth: That's very helpful. These are significant.

Rory: Yes. In the last two to three years I have spent more time in Asia than I have anywhere else. Within the Asian culture there is a thirst for learning. There is a great desire to understand and comprehend. There is a greater ability to adapt to a particular local culture. It isn't about buying something off the shelf and implementing. It's about taking the concepts, reworking them and bringing them out again.

Here is what I found when I looked at regional differences. North America tends to put a lot of emphasis in KM on technology. It's almost a platform on IT. If you look to Europe, there's a healthy skepticism of KM. "We'll use it, but we're really quite leery of jumping in all the way." So, there's a balance between the KM people concepts and the KM IT concepts. The only caveat is that certain European companies have great links with American companies and they, too, tip over to the IT side. But, when you go to Asia you find that the IT part is the lesser of the equation. In Asia, because of the importance of tacit, individual knowledge, consensus, community, and collectiveness, they put more emphasis on face-to-face meetings and bridge building, and then back that up with IT.

We're looking at balance. Look at how important face-to-face networking is at this conference and imagine trying to do the same thing through video-conferencing and email technologies. Look at it from that point of view, and add the tacit dimension to it, which we still struggle with in the west. as well as the idea of paradox. How can we achieve two goals at the same time or three goals at the same time? There are lessons to be learned.

Seth: The individual's goals may seem to conflict with the corporate goals.

Rory: Yes, I think those are the more difficult issues. For example, look at Western Europe and North America. Because of humanism and secularism, there's a growing tendency toward the individual. "How does the work fit around me? How does it affect my particular wants and desires?" At the same time there are the important questions to be answered, "How does this support community? How do I support the village? How do I support the group?" Asia emphasizes individual success within the context of societal success. Here we give up one for the other. This conflict needs to be resolved. The Asians can help us to understand this better.

Seth: Listening to John Seely Brown, I gained an appreciation for how innovation happens where conflict occurs.

Rory: I think he made a very good point about the periphery as a source of innovation. This is true. Once you've created a core set of competencies and created a mindset, it's very difficult to look outside. This holds true in the research I've done on organizational change. Very few companies voluntarily make change. It has to be done under external pressure. The pressure has to be so significant that you need to make a radical change. It's a bit like the Japanese society. Only twice in modern history have they made significant major changes. Once it was the Meiji Restoration when the country was not working and they realized they had to adopt western practices to be competitive. World isolation didn't work. The other time was after the Second World War when they realized they had to change their institutions to be competitive in the post war world.

These are extreme cases of waiting until the crisis is upon you, but to a greater or lesser degree it's that fear factor that motivates organizations. This fear comes from losing market share or losing investor confidence. This idea is something that organizations need to think more about. How do you build in the scenario planning and trend analysis so that you constantly challenge who you are? It's very, very difficult to do. Even on an individual level, when you think about making career changes, or go through a midlife crisis, there are external factors that come to play and it's a brave person who can actually confront these.

Seth: Based on your experience, where do you see storytelling popping up? What are the applications?

Rory: Storytelling has always been with us. If you look at cultures, that's how basic messages are passed from generation to generation. During the Age of Enlightenment we started to disassociate myths from the great cultural stories. These stories are actually representations of very important things. We said, "We don't believe in the fairies anymore. We don't believe in the gods and goddesses." Rationalism disputed the mythical approach. Look at the literature. From about 1500-1600 and onward, you see this change. We still have some fairy tales and the like, but they are now allegories and don't carry the great meanings they once did. That is symptomatic of storytelling becoming entertainment rather than being about life and existence.

There were many storytelling collections that were put together after the Second World War. When other cultures started to imbibe western society through television and radio, people realized that there was something important to be preserved. That movement reinvigorated the understanding that storytelling is more than entertainment. It's actually a method whereby we transmit behavior and values that better the individual, the group, the society. This is an age where we disbelieve so much, especially in business culture. It is so cost conscious, so bottom line driven. There is a growing appreciation that through this fuzzy-feely thing called storytelling messages actually get through. We actually change behaviors and change cultures. That is a very positive sign. Even in our age of skepticism there is something deep down that tells us storytelling is a very positive mechanism by which we transmit value.

The danger is that we mechanize storytelling to the point that we believe it has to follow a certain procedure. We can kill the things we love. If we're not careful, we'll say it has to be done a certain way. It has to have five lines, or three syllables, or it has to take on a particular form. We need to recognize the variety and the richness of storytelling, whether it's in a poetic form, as in a saga, or some sort of a crystallized, little gem of an idea. We can appreciate the diversity. We can encourage people to take the oral tradition as a way of importance. It is a way in which we continue to enrich individual and societal lives.

Seth: There have been applications of storytelling that you're familiar with: Denning's Springboard stories, Snowden's use of narrative databases and so on. Are there any that stand out for you or that you would like to keep an eye on in the times ahead?

Rory: I really can't say one is more or less superior. What I would say is that we need to sensitize individuals to be receptive. My background is science and my wife writes novels. Sometimes our worlds collide because she comes from a creative world and I come from a very logical world. Storytelling gives us the ears to hear the richness of our separate worlds.

Knowledge management creates individual and organizational wealth, improving the standard of living. This is the enrichment of society. I want to know how we can use stories to move the individual, the organization, and society as a whole, providing a better framework for life.



Rory L. Chase, Managing Director of Teleos, is an advisor, author and researcher in the development and implementation of knowledge management strategies and approaches. He is active in both formal and informal knowledge networks. He is the Founding Editor of the *Journal of Knowledge Management* and the *Journal of Intellectual Capital*. He received the 2001 Outstanding Editor of the Year award from MCB University Press for his contributions to these journals. Mr. Chase is a well-known author of numerous articles and papers on knowledge management, best practices, benchmarking and organizational excellence. He has served as Editor of journals and magazines on business transformation, service excellence, new product development and total quality, as well as editing business and technical books and reports. He is the author of *Creating a Knowledge Management Business Strategy* and the *Most Admired Knowledge Enterprises Report*.

Rory can be reached via email at info@knowledgebusiness.com

Teleos can be found on the web at: <http://www.knowledgebusiness.com>



Seth Kahan is an Organizational Storytelling specialist and keynote speaker. His presentations make conferences and conventions more effective by establishing an atmosphere of collegiate collaboration in the opening session. He has successfully used storytelling and community building to lead change and improve performance in organizations for over 14 years. He helped spearhead the World Bank's enterprise-wide knowledge management initiative in 1996 and built communities of practice among the 1100 information service providers in 2001. Seth has been selected by the Center for Association Leadership in Washington, DC to serve as a Business Visionary for his pioneering work. As a Distinguished Fellow of the Center for Narrative Studies, he is writing a book on the applications and use of storytelling to increase organizational effectiveness.

Seth can be reached via email at Seth@SethKahan.com

He can be found on the web at: <http://www.SethKahan.com>