

The Information Management Round Table

Connected Intelligence

May 4, 1999

The final session of the Information Management Round Table featured Derrick de Kerckhove, Professor and Director of the McLuhan Centre at the University of Toronto. Dr. de Kerckhove outlined his concept of “connected intelligence”, which draws upon understandings of human cognition, group behaviour, and multi-media analysis. In essence, it implies that knowledge is acquired through a shared and interactive process between individuals. From a practical perspective, new communications technologies have made connected intelligence a viable methodology, particularly through the use of the internet. Dr. de Kerckhove examined a number of these methodologies and their implications for problem-solving in the public service.

Connected Intelligence - Concept

Dr. de Kerckhove began by explaining the concept of connected intelligence. In essence, it pertains to intelligence or knowledge that exists outside of an individual which only becomes pertinent when shared with others. *Collective* intelligence, by contrast, is akin to the notion of culture; people make decisions as patterned responses irrespective of their interaction with others. The three following metaphors exemplify the difference:

Connected Intelligence

Collective Intelligence

Example 1:

Computer networks - link data and information between individuals

vs. *Computer hardware* - provide vessel for information sharing

Example 2:

Jazz ensemble - requires careful attention and reaction to expression of musicians

vs. *Military training* - requires strict adherence to patterns of thought

Example 3:

Theatrical improvisation - spontaneous interaction with fellow actors

vs. *Script-based play* - adherence to text

According to Dr. de Kerckhove, connected intelligence is a new concept which challenges traditional notions of psychology and cognition. Rather than defining knowledge as the property of a single individual, connected intelligence stresses the importance of sharing knowledge. As such, this concept places a premium on the *process* of creating knowledge rather than focusing on its content. “Knowledge management” -- like the concept of connected intelligence -- thus implies managing relationships between people as well as the media they use to communicate.

Connected Intelligence - Application

According to Dr. de Kerckhove, the sharing of information on-line is dramatically increasing our capacity to connect intelligence. Unlike the passive reception of information through television, the internet is a highly interactive medium. Other communication tools, such as radio and newspapers, lessened the role of interactive speech in the past; the internet, by contrast, has facilitated shared thought. It is commonly believed that on-line “talk” -- while silent -- will increase in speed until it operates in real time and, indeed, reaches the speed of thinking.

The power of the web is illustrated not only by its ability to locate information (through search engines, for example) but by fostering relationships between influential interest groups (e.g. the anti-MAI lobby). From the perspective of government, the internet will soon become an important tool as a medium of stakeholder and citizen consultation, particularly as access to the internet becomes more widespread. According to Dr. de Kerckhove, had the Spicer Commission used the internet (then in its infancy) in such a way, its findings would likely have been more accurate.

At present, however, the internet has not replaced the need for face-to-face interaction when solving problems. This is due to the fact that intelligence is not only expressed in words, but also by expression and body language. Video-conferencing can help replicate this interaction, though limitations still exist in the technology.

As a practical face-to-face application of connected intelligence, Dr. de Kerckhove developed a workshop methodology drawing upon its basic premise. This entails problem-solving in small groups (at least three teams of five people) with each participant assuming one of five roles: mover, shaker, producer, presenter, or doer. While individuals may choose their roles democratically, it is essential that each take ownership in the process. After deliberating on various sub-themes of a specific problem, each group presents its finding to the larger assembly for feedback. According to Dr. de Kerckhove, the benefits of this process derive from its unique patterning of association and, ultimately, its ability to derive creative solutions. The workshop methodology has already been used in a variety of forums, including the Club of Rome, the European Union, and at the local level in Holland.

In the Canadian context, Dr. de Kerckhove is a strong proponent of “soft power” as a strategy in foreign policy. This entails using diplomacy and building coalitions to advance particular interests, such as the advancement of human rights or the banning of anti-personnel landmines. As connected intelligence “in practice”, soft power does not rely on military strength but rather moral suasion and negotiation.

Connected Intelligence - Implications for Government

Dr. de Kerckhove pointed to the classical problem of bureaucratic isolation as the greatest impediment in the public service. In order to counteract this tendency, officials first need to account for the degree of connectivity within their organizations. They must identify areas where horizontal collaboration is deemed critical and then involve all levels of hierarchy in the problem-solving process. At present, senior officials place limited value in the role of the non-expert, which may lead to difficulties in seeking a commonality of interests. Non-experts can provide a valuable perspective in the deliberative process, though few managers are capable of discerning this value. As Dr. de Kerckhove noted, “if the mix is too rich, the car doesn’t start.” In other words, younger and less-experienced people are needed on executive and advisory committees for their ability as “doers”.

The public service would also likely benefit from working in small teams, akin to those described above. Various departments could share networks and databases on particular issues, for example, and then create “just in time” teams on a horizontal basis. These teams, and government in general, must also be flexible in accepting the input of citizens through a number of mechanisms. In addition to citizen engagement techniques presently used by government, more deliberative polling techniques (such as “preferendums”) could be used to better discern the preferences of citizens on a variety of policy options.

From the perspective of public policy, connected intelligence requires rejecting the old nineteenth century notion of linking “Centres of Excellence” in the area of science or public policy. Rather than connecting only elite organizations and researchers, the

government should facilitate the sharing of this information amongst the public. Libraries could be used, for example, to ensure maximum public access (akin to the SchoolNet program). These networks would effectively become public consulting centres, permitting citizens to directly propose strategies on-line. While it is unlikely that government would be able to act upon all citizens' desires under this scenario, more community action would nonetheless spur greater citizen involvement in implementing ideas, particularly on issues of a local nature.

Conclusion

Dr. de Kerckhove stressed the notion that intelligence must be perceived as a shared resource rather than the exclusive property of a private individual. In effect, intelligence exists outside individuals and becomes pertinent once shared. Adherence to this view has important methodological implications for the way that organizations operate. Most importantly, managing knowledge effectively requires managing relationships between people. This demands putting together a range of individuals with diverse experience and backgrounds when problem-solving. In the government, connected intelligence implies that collaboration is critical not only between departments but at all levels of hierarchy in a single organization. It also means reaching out to citizens in order to channel their views in policy-making and to empower their participation in governance more generally.