



# Organizational storytelling as a method of tacit-knowledge transfer: Case study from a Sri Lankan university<sup>☆</sup>

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## KEYWORDS

Storytelling;  
Knowledge transfer;  
Tacit knowledge;  
University library;  
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**Abstract** Sri Lanka has a long history and culture of storytelling but the use of stories for transferring tacit knowledge is absent. This paper is the first to examine the application of organisational stories as a method of tacit-knowledge transfer management tool in the library domain.

The study had two objectives; 1) To explore the potential of storytelling to transfer tacit knowledge from the Librarian to the junior executives. 2) To examine whether captured stories serve the pursuit of knowledge by the junior executives. Two research questions were formulated to achieve these objectives. The first research question (RQ1) *How can the tacit knowledge of a retiring senior executive be captured through stories?* was framed and addressed to achieve objective one and the second research question (RQ2) *Can the captured "stories of work" benefit knowledge workers in their pursuit of tacit knowledge?* was framed and addressed to achieve objective two. The study was based on primary data collected from the Librarian and executive staff of the Library by means of two Interview Schedules and the entire study was underpinned by an extensive review of research literature related to organizational storytelling. Qualitative as well as quantitative methods were used to analysis and interpretation data.

The findings of the study proved in response to RQ1 that organizational stories can be captured using a six-step process and a story capturing model which could be used by the other researcher emerged from the research. Nevertheless, findings also established that the comprehensiveness of the tacit knowledge that could be captured through stories would depend on the degree of confidentiality of the contents of the stories. Therefore all stories could not be recorded as they are told. Responding to RQ2 the findings proved that, captured "stories of work" can be used for the benefit of knowledge workers in their pursuit of tacit knowledge.

Based on these findings it was recommended that, the library should take initiatives to exploit the already prevailing habit of organizational storytelling in the library as a method

<sup>☆</sup> This article is based on a presentation at the 7th International Conference of the University of Librarians Conference of Sri Lanka (Wijetunge, 2011). Although it does duplicate some of the content of that presentation, this updated version provides detailed data from the study and an analysis of the data, as well as additional new resources.

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of transferring tacit knowledge in a deliberated manner and for this several activities were recommended.

The findings were based only on a single case, in a single organization carried out during a six-month period, within the boundaries of a specific organizational and social culture. Therefore additional case studies would be necessary to test the validity and reliability of the story capturing model.

This research is the first of its kind carried out in the library domain of Sri Lanka. Therefore it provides significant insights on which future researchers can build their studies.

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## Introduction

### Organizational storytelling

An organizational story is “a detailed narrative of past management actions, employee interactions, or other intra- or extra- organizational events that are communicated informally within the organization. Such narratives will ordinarily include a plot, major characters and outcome. A moral, or implication of the story for action, is usually implied if not explicitly stated” (Swap et al., 2001, p. 103). Ruggles considers stories to be “... great vehicles for wrapping together many elements of knowledge. A good story combines the explicit with tacit, the information with the emotion... Stories enable people to express and comprehend the sticky, context rich aspects of deep knowledge much more effectively...” (Ruggles, 2002, p. 2). Opining on the nature of stories as a research tool Hirsch and Rao (2003) comment that stories are “... empirical accounts of what goes on, of what went on. It’s based upon data. It has to be justified by the facts and by the ability of different people to see the same facts – all of the standard criteria for scientific enquiry. What we make of that story, the theoretical spin we give to it, that’s something which is changeable...” (Hirsch & Rao, 2003, p. 137).

### Types of stories

Researchers have identified several types of stories based on their purpose, content and a number of other criteria. Denning (2006)<sup>1</sup> identified seven types based on the purpose for which they are used. Martin, Feldman, Hatch, and Sitkin (1983),<sup>2</sup> Prusak (2001b)<sup>3</sup> and Reamy (2002a)<sup>4</sup> categorized different types according to their content.

Snowden (2005a) classified stories into four types<sup>5</sup> based on their simplicity/complexity and the type of message conveyed. Snowden (2005b), recognized two types – *anecdotes* and *stories*,<sup>6</sup> based on the degree of intervention towards the content. Snowden (2005b) further categorized stories as *Scripts* and *anti-stories* based on the degree of organizational reality involved in the content,<sup>7</sup> and he also identified a taxonomy of stories<sup>8</sup> as *fiction*, *faction* and *facts* based on the factuality of the stories.

Based on narrative and ante narrative perspectives, Boje (2001) contends that a story is an account of incidents or events, but narrative comes after and adds “plot” and “coherence” to the story line. Story is therefore “ante” to story and narrative is post-story. Boje (2008) also perceived that *storytelling* is non-linear, fragmented, distributed and collective unlike *narratives*. Taking a different standpoint Metz (2003) argued that, when stories are given chronology and continuity, in retrospect they become narratives. There are other researchers (Bryant & Cox, 2004; Denning, 2006; Marshall & Adamic, 2010) who see stories as narratives and contend that the two terms can be used interchangeably.

### Storytelling as a management tool

Researchers have identified a variety of instances of using stories as a management tool. They are used as a problem solving tool (Boyce, 1996; McLellan, 2006; Steen, 1999), for action research, sense making, innovation and new product development (Boyce, 1996) and for entertainment (Prusak, 2001a; Snowden, 2005d). Because a story is a powerful and free technology that doesn’t need expensive hard/software or experts, it can be used to communicate with a large number of people amazingly rapidly (Prusak, 2001b) and for

<sup>1</sup> Stories which – spark action (Springboard stories), communicate who you are, transmit values, communicate who the firm is, foster collaboration, tame the grapevine and share knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> The rule breaking stories, Is the big boss human, Can the little man rise to the top, Will I get fired, Will the organization help me when I have to move, How will the boss react to mistakes and how will the organization deal with obstacles stories.

<sup>3</sup> Stories about people, work, organization, signals, past/future and life based on the contents of the stories.

<sup>4</sup> Anecdotes, myths, fables, metaphors, cautionary tales, success/horror stories, lessons learnt, hero stories, puzzles, detective stories, bonding stories, attack stories and propaganda.

<sup>5</sup> **Myths** – simple stories that spread rapidly and have different decay rates, **Fables** – structured with sufficient complexity and the audience is unable to repeat the story but remembers the message, **Viruses** – predatory, parasitical, symbiotic stories and **Archetypes** – stories owning up to failure or characterizing good/bad behaviours.

<sup>6</sup> **Anecdotes** are naturally occurring stories captured in conversations, may be facts, faction or fiction and **stories** are purposefully constructed. The key difference is the deliberate construction and intent.

<sup>7</sup> **Scripts** are official stories of an organization and **anti-stories** are cynical and spontaneous reactions to scripts that are too far away from the organization’s real life.

<sup>8</sup> Most stories are factual but some are faction (history changed to conform to the current requirements and fiction).

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