The World Is Round

Laurence Prusak

Sometime in 2005, Internet watchers say, the billionth user logged on. No one knows who that was, of course, but according to Web usability expert Jakob Nielsen, "Statistically, we're likely talking about a 24-year-old woman in Shanghai." In news reports, blogs, and cocktail-party conversations, this data point got trotted out to underscore what's become conventional wisdom: The world is flat.

Thomas Friedman, author of the best seller by that name, put the flat-world concept this way in a recent *Wired* interview: "Several technological and political forces have converged, and that has produced a global, Web-enabled playing field that allows for multiple forms of collaboration without regard to geography or distance – or, soon, even language." The playing field Friedman describes is, of course, level – flattened by the unfettered flow of information. "Bill Gates has a nice line," Friedman continued. "[Gates] says, 20 years ago, would you rather have been a B-student in Poughkeepsie or a genius in Shanghai? Twenty years ago you'd rather be a B-student in Poughkeepsie. Today?…Not even close. You'd much prefer to be the genius in Shanghai because you can now export your talents anywhere in the world."

Yes, we are interconnected on a truly astonishing scale. But Gates, Friedman, and many others make a fundamental error when they argue that brute connectivity will level the playing field, giving that twentysomething in Shanghai the ability to compete head-to-head with anyone, anywhere in the world. Their mistake is that they're confusing information with knowledge.

This isn't a new idea. College professors have forever struggled with students' efforts to pass off the former as the latter. But consultants, journalists, and businesspeople have dangerously blurred the distinction as they've championed trillions of dollars worth of IT purchases made with the intention of "managing knowledge." For the most part, what we've built is a vast global IT infrastructure that is very good at moving information, but not knowledge, from one place to another.

What's the difference between information and knowledge? Information is a message, one-dimensional and bounded by its form: a document, an image, a speech, a genome, a recipe, a symphony score. You can package it and instantly distribute it to anyone, anywhere. Google, of course, is currently the ultimate information machine, providing instantaneous access to virtually any piece of information you can imagine – including instructions for how to perform a laparoscopic appendectomy. But I'll wager no one would opt to have an appendectomy performed by that young woman in Shanghai – no matter how much information she'd gathered on the procedure – unless she'd also had

years of hands-on surgical training. Only those years of reading, watching, and doing, under a skilled tutor's watchful eye, would give her the knowledge to expertly perform the surgery.

Knowledge results from the assimilation and connecting of information through experience, most often through apprenticeship or mentoring. As a result, it becomes embedded in organizations in ways that, so far, have largely evaded codification. Knowledge gives firms the ability to create new drugs, design racing boats, offer useful competitive advice, and so on. And while the cost of obtaining, storing, and moving information has plummeted, the cost of doing so with knowledge hasn't dropped much at all (in the case of surgical training and some other skills, it has probably increased). That's because no amount of IT can – at least not yet – crack the problem of how to speed knowledge acquisition. It takes about the same amount of time today to learn French, calculus, or chemistry as it did 200 years ago. Knowledge is time-consuming and expensive to develop, retain, and transfer – and that's as true for organizations and countries as it is for individuals.

India and China, in particular, are making rapid strides in their knowledge capabilities. The information-based customer service jobs that world-flattening technologies have made available to people in India have been joined there by truly creative, knowledge-driven software development. And China's information-driven manufacturing capacity is being enhanced by knowledge-based product design. But what percentage of Indians and Chinese are actually participating in this knowledge economy?

Most of the people in the world remain out of the knowledge loop and off the information grid. One billion people on the Internet means there are five and a half billion people who aren't on it. Bringing those people into the global conversation is essential to achieving true democratization of knowledge. But simply giving everyone access to e-mail and Google will never in itself flatten the earth. Until our governments, NGOs, schools, corporations, and other institutions embrace the idea that knowledge – not information – is the key to prosperity, most of the world's people will remain a world apart.

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