



INTRODUCING THE WORLD KNOWLEDGE CAFE

Helen Paige is not a librarian – instead it was her postgraduate studies in education that led her inexorably towards an understanding of the knowledge economy we in the library and information services sector know so well. Now, as director of a business specialising in corporate learning using food and cooking to encourage team building, Helen manages 'world knowledge cafes' for businesses and at professional development events. INCITE asked Helen to describe her deliberate approach to value-adding your networking over that doubleshot latte.

My definition of a world knowledge cafe is a learning community that brings people together to learn from each other in order to profit from in-house intellectual capital, to make a difference, or to introduce change in their organisational practices. The cafe-style approach provides excellent networking, knowledge sharing and learning opportunities. These sessions can make a real difference in introducing change and progress to an organisation.

The major reason my clients are interested in the idea of world knowledge cafes is because they see them as a different and engaging way of finding answers to organisational problems or difficulties, while in a conference environment, it is more about pulling conference themes or thoughts together, during or at the end of a conference.

When planning for a world knowledge cafe, we always start by identifying the questions to which clients really want answers.

For instance, for a legal firm looking at greater organisational use of their intranet, questions focused on asking what participants think is the key knowledge that needs to be shared across the firm and how participants thought they could contribute and add value in the future by using the intranet to share information and ideas. Another example is a recent international conference on intellectual capital in Cyprus, where the world knowledge cafe concept was used at the conclusion of the conference to ask delegates, "what intellectual capital ideas and developments do you expect to live and see?". Such questions encourage people to think, to reflect on presentations they have heard during the conference, and to have a bit of fun and share experiences.

After the questions are determined, we put in place a number of key elements for a successful cafe event. We set up a suitable and inviting space in a cafe style with tables and chairs for groups of four or five people. We offer refreshments (it is supposed to be a cafe after all!) and encourage people to sit with new acquaintances, and we cover the tables with butcher's paper, crayons, coloured pencils, and brightly coloured sticky note pads to encourage drawing, creativity and thinking 'outside the square'.


A host and scribe are chosen for each table. We begin with an introduction of the process and etiquette for the cafe, emphasising the different ways participants can be involved, including supporting constructive dialogue and asking members to enter the cafe with a goal of learning from each person at their table while also encouraging everybody on the table to be heard and, importantly, ensuring scribes capture what occurs. The scribe must be someone with the capacity to 'dot point' issues arising in discussion. This is essential – this is the 'take away' that provides the capacity for participants to use the information collected later, either individually or in the organisational group. The focus is on the practical and on providing incentives for participants to actively engage with knowledge management in the workplace.

The cafe approach enables conference participants to 'wrap up' proceedings and engage with colleagues. Amongst clients who use the concept in their workplace, we have found the cafe approach extracts "many more ideas in a shorter time period", as one client put it. That same organisation has since rolled out the concept through multiple regions of operation internationally, using the world knowledge cafe approach to inform strategy across a range of projects.

I believe the world knowledge cafe is another way that all individuals can share, listen, be involved, exchange knowledge, learn from each other and enjoy each other's company and inputs. And isn't that what we all should be seeking in the knowledge-based economy?

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