

# A problem shared is a problem solved

**Business Education**  
GURUS OF THE FUTURE

Using old ideas in new ways is the art of 'knowledge broker' Corey Billington of IMD, writes Haig Simonian

Corey Billington's business card calls him a professor of operations management and procurement. Before moving to IMD business school in Lausanne, Switzerland, the 49-year-old Californian worked for close to two decades at Hewlett-Packard, where procurement was one of his priorities.

Hardly the stuff of social revolution. But Prof Billington's interests range beyond supply chains and sourcing. The trained engineer has focused on what he calls "knowledge brokering". This is the art of "facilitating information flows" and, beyond that, understanding what sort of people are "problem solvers" and how to interconnect them.

His research has obvious business implications. Prof Billington cites countless instances where companies have tried to improve their processes and practices by importing outside specialists, by conducting internal brainstorming sessions, or by taking in ideas from the workplace.

For a while *kaizen* – Japanese for "continuous improvement" – was a buzz word, especially in the motor industry where manufacturers boasted of boosting their productivity by implementing shopfloor suggestions. Today the concept is so ingrained it appears common sense rather than oriental mystique.

Yet although the need to

get better has become self-evident, companies seldom realise their full potential, Prof Billington says. And that applies as much to big strategic decisions – the classic terrain for outside consultants – as to micro departmental issues.

"Knowledge brokering is all about using old ideas in new ways. How can we take advantage of all those minds out there?" he says.

The departure point is that established methods are not guaranteed to yield results. Hostility to outsiders or an inward-looking corporate culture can rob a company of access to new thought. Even when outsiders are hired, their ideas may founder on cultural issues at the client company, which consultants fail fully to understand.

Prof Billington's focus is on bringing in a wider range of problem solvers. Often such people – whether academics, government scientists or wacky inventors – have answers to problems but have not exploited them because the right question has never been asked.

Problem solvers could be anything from suppliers, who often have intimate knowledge of their customers, to former staff. Someone who has retired may have profound institutional memories and, because they are outside the corporation, be free from the political correctness or hierarchies that hindered them in the past.

There are practical constraints, however. "In some cases, as with outsourcing, there are barriers," Prof Billington says. "Control and intellectual property rights are obvious issues."

But he cites countless examples where companies have benefited by looking outside established circles for solutions. "For some problems, the 'usual suspects' don't necessarily provide the best answers."

Prof Billington's interests reflect a trend. Now that communications have been revolutionised by the internet, steps are being taken to institutionalise ad hoc problem solving. InnoCentive, spun off from Eli Lilly in 2001, links 150,000 scientists and technicians to whom targeted problems can be addressed.

Its rival NineSigma, which started in 2000, has an

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even broader network of "solution providers".

Remuneration for those supplying the solutions is usually modest. Some companies give cash rewards. Others offer prizes, sometimes provided by charities in a trend becoming known as prize philanthropy.

"There are lots of people with expertise who may not be able, or wish, to be in the traditional workforce. Yet they may have just the knowledge to help solve a problem, at a fraction of the cost of consultants. And they may have a much better cultural understanding, aiding implementation," Prof Billington says.

In his two years at IMD, he has not just researched knowledge brokering but also conducted practical experiments. Working with students, he has posed about 20 genuine, ad hoc problems from outsiders.

For example, Andy Papanthassiou, a US car racing specialist, approached the professor about how to improve the speed of pit crews. Shorter pitstops can allow a car to nudge ahead of a rival. But over the years



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Corey Billington, IMD

the most obvious innovations have been reaped and finding further improvements is more difficult than ever. Results are measured in hundredths of a second.

Even though highly competitive racing teams pay tremendous attention to these matters, Prof Billington and his students produced new and workable results a long way from the noise and smell of the pits. About a dozen of their ideas have been deemed sufficiently promising to warrant practical testing.

At its best, knowledge brokering improves companies' problem-solving abilities, which leads to better products and services. More broadly, it may bring societal advantages.

Increased life expectancy and better medicine are transforming the demographics of developed countries. For Prof Billington, retirees represent a largely untapped source of knowledge. Women who left the workforce to raise a family, and may be unable or unwilling to return, are another group. And independent geeks, who are often unsuited to traditional working environments, may be brilliant problem solvers.

"Rising affluence means some people can now work when and how they want. By becoming part of a network, people can remain involved and still feel valid, without having to join the conventional workforce."

Ultimately, Prof Billington's aim is to identify what characterises problem solvers and analyse how they differ across cultures or societies. For the time being, his interests remain largely unexplored among business academics. But he is convinced that knowledge brokering will gain adherents as networks improve and information filters out.

This is the second of a four-part series on business ideas in academia

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