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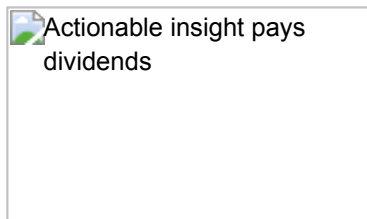
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## Actionable insight pays dividends

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**Jeff Patmore is BT's head of University Research. Here he discusses how the informed views of BT's partners can help the company to maintain its propensity to innovate...**

Spending time in universities talking with our academic colleagues often gives us a new view on a business problem. We have come to call this 'actionable insight', ideas which change the way we do business.

One of these serendipitous moments happened recently, while meeting with a senior business school academic at the University of Cambridge we started to discuss knowledge sharing and the management of knowledge in our respective organisations.

Over a coffee, my academic colleagues asked, "are we really more efficient as a result of the internet and new technologies and applications, or are we merely doing things differently"?

It was a great question and one which probably only one an academic would dare ask.

Of course my instant reaction was to say that my team is far more efficient in the way it works now than it did say five years ago. Use of applications such as the wiki had allowed us all to collaborate with colleagues both inside and outside of the company more easily and quickly. I gave some examples of small research collaborations where timescales had been reduced from months to weeks and explained that these had included team members from all over the globe, something which had really only been made possible because of our use these new tools.

### Shared knowledge

I described how tacit knowledge, that is knowledge in peoples' heads, had been turned into explicit knowledge, which could be shared with all in the company, again in short timescales, by the use of the internet and new web applications. Lastly I gave examples of some of our business support applications which allow us to perform tasks like training, travel and people management, all online.

He remained unconvinced. "Are you sure you are actually more efficient"?

This time I thought more deeply, how is our business really benefiting from the way we work today?

We communicate quickly through the use of internet and web applications, we share knowledge and thinking through the use of wikis and blogs and we store our internal information on web addressable servers so that it can be indexed and easily searched and found by our people, where ever they are on the planet.

Our teams use collaboration spaces online and network on the web with colleagues inside and outside of the company to develop new ideas and to research new science and technology areas.

We have acquired a good understanding of how trust works in people networks and we utilise the recommendation of peers to help us filter the vast amounts of new content added to the web every day.

Working with business schools we actively recruit and develop 'T shaped people', that is people who are both deep problem solvers in their own domain but are also capable of interacting with and understanding specialists from a wide range of other disciplines.

And of course we spend time seeking insight from our academic colleagues networking in the universities globally and not just lurking on the outside looking in.

## **Cultural change**

I explained to my academic colleague that there had been a real culture shift in our business over the last ten years and that the old 'knowledge is power' mentality which existed in some areas was very much a thing of the past.

I highlighted how our people really understand and value the sharing of ideas using new tools such as wikis, blogs, social networks and media sharing applications This has been reflected in key business factors, such as the innovation pipeline, time to market and the time taken to fix customer problems.

Finally I made the point that in recent years there had been major changes both in the use of new technology and in our innovation culture in the company and that this had definitely made us more efficient. I went on to explain that as a company, BT understands the need to continue to innovate and adopt new ideas and spending time in universities all over the world talking with academics about their ideas will always be one of the tools we use to help us do this.

My academic colleague finally agreed that we had made significant changes and that we were now working in a more efficient way than we had in the past but he suggested that now might be a good time to stand back and to audit where we were and to think about how we could continue to change and adopt new ways of working so that we could maintain this increasing efficiency over future years.

I have found that this conversation over a coffee at Cambridge has sparked new ideas about how we should communicate, collaborate and share knowledge in the future.

With new web applications and tools appearing almost daily it is essential that we continue to examine these with partners who can give us a 'neutral' but informed view through their own experimentation and networks of contacts and our friends in academia have shown that they are uniquely positioned to do this, providing us with 'actionable insight'.



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