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What did the ancient Greeks ever do for us?

By David Turner

What's Plato got to do with outsourcing? That intriguing question was the title of a talk at a business conference in Phoenix, Arizona, earlier this year. It was posed by Maurice Biriotti of SHM, a UK-based consultancy that pays academia's best minds for ideas that help businesses think more intelligently about problems. He was joined in the presentation by Neil Cameron, chief information officer at Unilever, an SHM client.

The answer to their Plato outsourcing question was "a surprising amount" and explains why Unilever is just one of an increasing number of businesses that are turning to academia for ideas.

Mr Biriotti, formerly a university lecturer in literature, heads off any scepticism about the relevance of ancient philosophy by explaining Plato's concept of "the writing paradox" - that the written word is clear to the writer at the time of writing, but other people later read different meanings into the words.

When it comes to outsourcing, for example, the paradox applies well to written contracts, where outsourcer and outsourcing provider may genuinely hold different interpretations of what was agreed. Even more topically, Mr Biriotti suggests that academic research on the philosophy of trust could help avoid mistakes as public institutions try to rebuild confidence between market players, which has been shattered by the credit crunch. Citing recent work by Onora O'Neill, the Cambridge philosopher, he says that "wrapping ourselves up in a whole load of regulation could counter-intuitively make it hard to restore trust by making people rely on rules, rather than on developing well-placed trust in other human beings".

If such use of academics and academic material seems like a gimmick, Mr Biriotti points out that "many of our clients don't know" about the involvement of academia. He adds: "When I pitch for work, quite often I just do so by saying we're very good at culture change."

In fact, there are many cases where companies are directly seeking out the brain power of academics from universities, although none will divulge how lucrative the work is.

The communications group BT has enlisted the advice of philosophers at Cambridge

university several times. Alex Oliver, reader in philosophy at Cambridge, took part in the first workshop on customer loyalty involving academics and BT. "We asked: what are the different kinds of loyalty, for example, loyalty to a football club, to a political party, or between husband and wife? And we asked, which of these do we want, and what are the gains, because sometimes it can be a drag". He explains: "A loyal customer may well resist changes in business practices".

BT even has a head of strategic university research, Jeff Patmore, who says the exercise was effective. The company spends "millions" a year on commercially useful research at 36 universities, he says, including in disciplines such as social anthropology, that might at first sight seem irrelevant to BT's operations. Mr Patmore knows "probably 10" people in the UK who do a similar full-time job of searching out suitable talent in academia, "and there are probably a few more".

Businesses do not necessarily want academic consultants just for their minds. Angela Clow, a psychology lecturer at Westminster University working with a multinational, says: "They wanted me to have the academic kudos to present to the top, for the top to take it seriously." Charged with reducing stress among the workforce, her tasks include finding out why some senior executives with demanding jobs do not feel stressed, in order to disseminate this elixir throughout the company. Ms Clow naturally praises the company's embrace of rigorous academic assessment, although she notes sternly that "I have to put my foot down sometimes". The management have tried to abandon certain questions "because they didn't want a certain answer", she explains.

That experience highlights a potential criticism, namely that business will inevitably corrupt or distort academic thinking.

But Ms Clow's struggle is also, conversely, a reason to seek the insights of academics, in order to stop business lapsing into a narrow mentality. As Mr Patmore says: "You can become quite introverted in business." BT benefits from academics' "fresh and unfettered outlook," he adds. "They can ask the hard questions, 'well why do you do it that way?'" Not, perhaps, a question a middle manager can always ask a senior BT executive.

While acting as consultants on business thinking is a way for academics to make money from their discipline, there are other rewards too.

Alex Bentley, an anthropologist at Durham University who uses insights into human pack mentality and behavioural patterns in his work for the appropriately named Herd Consulting, says he learns "an enormous amount from trying to sell underarm deodorant".

But he is, he admits, "particularly excited about our projects dealing with public service" for Naked Communications, which advises the Department of Health about encouraging safe sex.

Scott Thomson, global head of evaluation at Naked, says he learned from Mr Bentley that

imitating others often starts "in a very piecemeal form", through doing the same as direct acquaintances, rather than responding en masse to television messages. As a result, Naked persuaded the government to spend less of its safe sex budget on TV advertising, and more on local testing facilities for sexual diseases in convenient places such as pharmacies, hoping the habit of testing would spread by word of mouth once opportunities to be tested became more visible.

Mr Bentley says such experiences yield valuable material for academic papers. In other words, business can furnish academics with fresh ideas, as well as vice-versa. "You learn from the real world," he concludes humbly.

Lucy Kellaway's Problem column returns on December 4

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