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The knowledge | Manfred Bornemann

Manfred Bornemann is a restless individual. Not just a pioneer of intellectual-capital measurement and a knowledge-management practitioner, but an entrepreneur and academic, too.

By Rob Buckley

When writing a profile of someone, it's always a good idea to start by trying to sum up the subject in a few words. Sometimes this can be hard. Sometimes it can be easy. However, knowledge management practitioner, researcher and academic Manfred Bornemann handed his summary to us on a plate when we were arranging a time in his busy schedule for us to speak to him. "Let's try Wednesday," he wrote. "Depending on the weather forecast, I might decide on short notice to climb a mountain."

That does, indeed, give you a flavour of the man: Manfred Bornemann, 'knowledge nomad', ready to climb a mountain at short notice.

Certainly, 'mountain' would be a good way to describe Bornemann's curriculum vitae (CV). Despite being just 34 years old, Bornemann has written numerous books and articles for journals; he teaches at universities around the world; he's founded various knowledge management (KM) organisations and sits on the advisory boards and committees of many journals and events; he's founded several companies, including his own consultancy; he's implemented and managed multiple applied research projects and developed important intellectual capital reporting methodologies; and – oh yes – he is a member of the illustrious Entovation 100 global alliance of KM professionals.

It's not surprising that he has many fans, including intellectual-capital guru Leif Edvinsson and Entovation's founder, Debra Amidon, who describes herself as "an ardent admirer of him and his work".

Yet Bornemann became a knowledge management (KM) practitioner almost by accident. Born in Wagna, Austria, he studied economics as an undergraduate at the Karl Franzens University Graz in his home country, before visiting Harvard for a summer school in international management and going on to attain an MSc in social and business sciences. While looking for a thesis for his doctorate, he came across the idea of intellectual capital.

"It's a story of laziness," he confesses. "When I was a student in

Graz University, I was busy with two subjects: business administration and I was also in law school. I'd heard of intellectual capital and I thought intellectual assets and intellectual capital were the same as patenting, which was a big subject back then in law school. I thought I could do a joint thesis and cover two subjects with one big project."

Despite discovering his mistake a few weeks later, he started working with Professors Ante Pulic and Ursula Schneider on researching how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the surrounding region of Austria used intellectual capital. He also began to develop a 'social club' among PhD students at affiliated universities that shared information about literature. After completing his thesis in 1998, and with a global network of contacts built up from numerous worldwide conferences, he decided to become a KM consultant.

"The keystone of my personal career was my meeting with Gunter Koch," says Bornemann. Koch was the managing director of the Austrian Research Centers Seibersdorf, the largest applied research centre in Austria. A public-private partnership, it was also a not-for-profit organisation, but investors still wanted to know where their money was going.

"His answer was, 'We can show you with our intellectual-capital statement what we are doing?'" He asked Bornemann and others to develop the tools and methodologies necessary to develop that statement. "We stole from Danish guidelines, Australian experiences, Canadian and US approaches. But we learnt that the monetary approaches weren't suitable for us. So we took all those ingredients to create a new method of intellectual-capital reporting for research companies."

Together with another colleague, he then transferred the techniques to industry, which led him to the field of system



dynamics. “The next step was quite obvious: we wanted to show relationships, so system dynamics became part of our tools.” Using system dynamics, Bornemann and others were able to create a toolkit for SMEs that wanted to report on their intellectual capital and to see how change might affect it.

At the suggestion of Leif Edvinsson, pioneer of the intellectual-capital concept and *Inside Knowledge* editorial board member, and with a €100,000 backing from Berlin’s Ministry for Economic Affairs, Bornemann was able to take this methodology to Germany as a director and consulting partner of consultancy Arbeitskreis Wissensbilanz.

Since 2004, the company has implemented pilot intellectual-capital reports for 52 different German SMEs. But the guidelines developed for the project have spread far wider than that. “It’s quite successful right now,” he says. “We have distributed 15,000 hard copies all over Germany, and 30,000 PDF downloads from our server – although we don’t know how many are now circulating because that’s the nature of PDFs.”

This is arguably the biggest success in Bornemann’s career so far, he says. “I’m very proud of my team. We have competencies from a technical background, marketing, psychology. We try to take the best from each discipline and try to come up with the best, most applicable and cheapest options.”

Ironically for someone specialising in intellectual capital and KM, Bornemann admits he doesn’t know how many people are actually using the methodology yet. “We have no real insight into how many companies are doing intellectual-capital reports. We have 150 consultants trained in seminars, but feedback is very slow. Maybe they’re not allowed to talk. Maybe they’re doing nothing, which would be my worst option. Or maybe they’re very busy implementing it in many companies and don’t have time to tell us – that’s my favourite option.”

Knowledge nomad

In between refereeing journals such as *The Learning Organization* and *Knowledge Management Research and Practice*, and refereeing and organising conferences such as ICKM, IKNOW, OKLC and APKMC, Bornemann somehow finds the time to be a scientific advisor for InCaS, the intellectual capital statement made in Europe, for which he is helping to develop and implement a guideline for corporate intellectual-capital statements.

He is also a lecturer at his undergraduate university as well as at universities and business schools in Germany, Australia, Asia and even further afield. And he’s a member and founder of many professional bodies, including the Wissenregion Steiermark in Graz, the Wissensmanagement Forum Graz and the Gesellschaft für Wissensmanagement in Germany.

As if all that weren’t enough for one polymath, as well as KM, Bornemann has also dipped his toe into other waters. In 1998, having just finished his initial education – and with a baby on the way – he founded his first company to give himself “the freedom and flexibility to make some money”.

A self-proclaimed entrepreneur, Bornemann then founded another company to export pumpkin seeds to Japan.

“It was an innovative start-up, but we went bankrupt anyway,” he recalls. He says the experience was a big learning curve for him, not least because of the differences between investing his own money and working with others’. At the very least, he’ll wait for repeat customers to re-order before stocking large numbers of easily degradable pumpkin seeds again – unlikely though it is that that will arise in his consultancy work.

Bornemann is clear that KM is a methodology not a software product. “I was very conservative and even negative on that topic for a few years. I think people would like to rely on tools: it gives them a feeling of security and developed structure they can build on. We did a tool for intellectual-capital reporting but, essentially, KM is a topic of people,” he says.

As a practice, knowledge management needs to be implemented by general management, he adds, and should therefore improve the profitability of a company. “It’s not about meeting in a coffee bar, it’s not about databases, it’s about creating value based on the intellectual capital of an organisation. If we repeat the abusive use of the concept of KM by software companies of a few years ago, where they were just selling software and not providing support and education about how to use it, then KM will be no topic in a few years from now.”

However, Bornemann is confident that this won’t happen. With Bornemann and others teaching KM as part of general business-management courses, he feels that it’s likely to be part of future managers’ overall skillset, rather than a separate optional specialisation.

With his triad of expertise – academia, applied research and consulting – Bornemann has dubbed himself a ‘knowledge nomad’: not only travelling a huge number of kilometres each year spreading the knowledge management word, but migrating between areas of expertise, never settling down in one. He even has the title printed on his business cards. “I won’t be a professor in the next five years. I’m not the highest paid consultant. Maybe I’m not the most excellent teacher. But what I try to do is translate meaning. I’m an ambassador.”

With industry wanting answers immediately, applied research wanting results within years and academia looking for ‘truths’ that last centuries, Bornemann wants to bring something from each area’s skills to the others, translating from one world to the other.

Despite Bornemann’s vast body of work so far, that really is just the tip of the mountain: there’s more to come, he says. “I have a lot to learn,” he says modestly. “Millennium Wunderkinder, like the Google founders, aren’t role models. I truly believe in seniority and experience. You can’t be a senior business-leader when you’re 35 to 40. But maybe I have the potential to be.” ■