



## The Knowledge

# David Gurteen

He's the king of knowledge cafés. The model of knowledge sharing. The architect of the world's most friendly knowledge website. Host to online discussion forums. Author of a monthly newsletter, now in its eighth year, with a subscription list of 15,000 people in 154 countries. He is one of the world's most respected knowledge experts. Yet he is unassuming, not 'authoritative'. Always open to other points of view. He is the David among KM Goliaths.

Before David Gurteen became all that, he logged over 30 years in high technology industries as a professional software development manager and in the late '80s worked for Lotus Development as 'International Czar,' responsible for ensuring that Lotus products were designed for the global marketplace.

"This was one of the most rewarding and fun times of my career, as my job was really all about knowledge sharing and working with people," he says. "It was also a KM role though, of course, the term was not used in those days."

In 1993 he left Lotus and founded Gurteen Knowledge where he started out working as a Lotus Notes consultant. Lotus Notes was one of the first collaborative application development platforms that allowed users to communicate, coordinate and collaborate on a global scale. What he learnt developing such applications was that the real barriers to knowledge sharing and collaboration had little to do with the technology but more to do with the attitudes and behaviours of the people.

Then in the mid-to-late '90s with the birth of the commercial web and knowledge management (KM), he found a more natural home in KM and this led to the creation of his website, the publication of his knowledge letter and the formation of the Gurteen Knowledge Community with the purpose of accelerating people's

understanding of the need for new ways of seeing the world and of working. This has been his focus ever since.

### Knowledge community

The Gurteen Knowledge Community is for people who are committed to making a difference, people who wish to share and learn from each other and who strive to see the world differently, think differently and act differently.

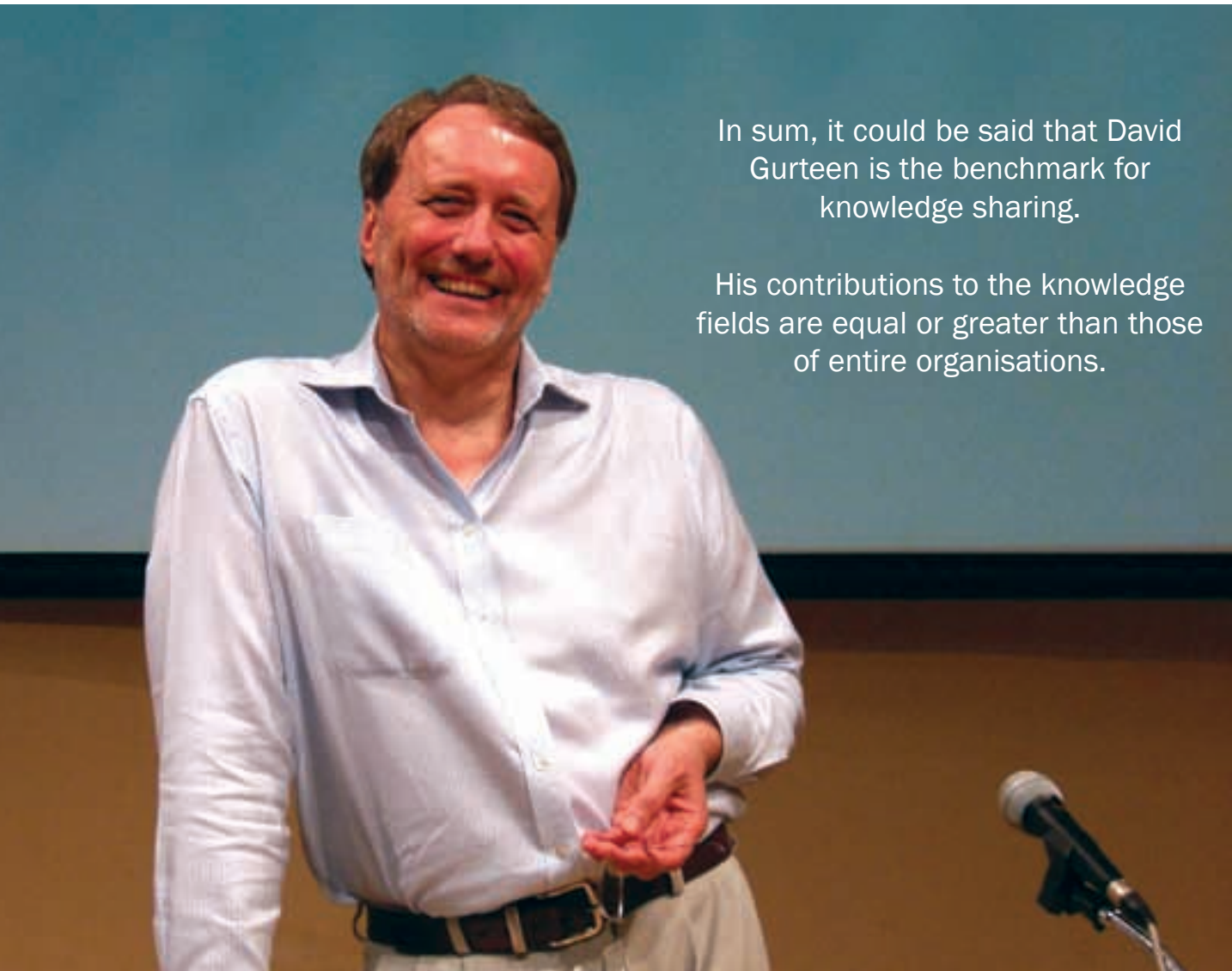
Gurteen says the members are inclined to action, see themselves as thought-leaders and change activists, recognise the importance of understanding through dialogue and conversation, have a passion for learning, are open minded and non-judgmental by nature, and value diversity and cultural differences.

People join the community to come together to take action, to explore new ways of working, to improve their understanding of the world, to meet like-minded people (and not so like minded), to share knowledge and to learn, to gain new and different perspectives and to give/gain support and motivation from other members.

Membership is free and the only 'obligation' is to receive the free monthly newsletter. Members of the community are entitled to attend Gurteen Knowledge Café, meetings which are held regularly in London, along with the regional communities in Liverpool, Bristol, New York City, Zurich and Adelaide.

Open cafés are held in various cities throughout the world – wherever he happens to be on business. This last 12 months alone have seen open cafés in Norway, Dubai, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Phoenix (US) and Sydney. "This is a huge part of who I am and what I'm about," Gurteen says. "Whenever I visit a country on business, I mail my community and ask who would like to host an open Gurteen Knowledge Café."

There are also knowledge cafés at conferences, and internally for organisations, plus knowledge café workshops where he teaches others how to run a café.



In sum, it could be said that David Gurteen is the benchmark for knowledge sharing.

His contributions to the knowledge fields are equal or greater than those of entire organisations.

### **Knowledge letter**

Gurteen had a clear vision of his audience from the very first issue of his knowledge letter: “Many of you have a technical orientation; others a people one; some of you are business managers and others are individual contributors. So my challenge is to strike a balance between the ‘business’ domain and the ‘human’ domain.”

First published in June, 2000, the Gurteen Knowledge Letter went out to his personal list of 300 acquaintances. He promised the letter would contain roughly 10 items on subjects like knowledge management, learning, creativity and the effective use of internet technology. The items would be short and succinct but would point readers to richer resources on the web.

He called the format a smorgasbord with “lots of tasty little bites to eat – some you may enjoy, some you may not

and some may be an acquired taste. So nibble at the morsels you like and push the others aside. What you find food for thought may not be liked by others; and what others like you may find tasteless.”

### **King of cafés**

Sometimes people attend the cafés just to learn how to conduct knowledge cafés. He doesn’t pretend to be the originator or last word on cafés and refers people to The World Café. But if they want to learn how Gurteen does it, he readily shares his method.

The purpose of his knowledge cafés is to bring a group of people together to have an open, creative conversation on a topic of mutual interest to surface their collective knowledge, to share ideas and insights and to gain a deeper understanding of the subject and the issues involved.

Although this may seem like a 'talking shop' – it is not as improvement in understanding, ultimately leads to action in the form of better decision-making and innovation and thus, tangible business outcomes.

"Knowledge cafés can be run in many ways," he says. "There is no definitive format but some ways are more effective than others." For many reasons, he runs his cafés to a quite different format to the one outlined in the World Café website [theworldcafe.com].

A café usually runs for one to two hours with anywhere from 15 to 50 people attending. The only hard and fast rule is that most of the meeting be devoted to conversation. Gurteen welcomes the group and after a speed networking session, he spends 10 minutes or so explaining what his cafés are about; then 10 or 15 minutes outlining the subject or theme, (either David does this or an invited speaker) ending with a single open-ended question. Participants break up into groups of five for small group conversations, change tables every so often and reassemble at the end for a whole group conversation.

It's as simple as that. No attempt is normally made to 'capture' the conversation but participants leave with key insights in their heads or in notes (which Gurteen favors). He feels any formal attempt to record the sessions inhibits the conversation and open knowledge sharing.

### Friendly website

If simplicity is the key to Gurteen's knowledge cafés, personalisation and organisation are the keys to his content-rich website [www.gurteen.com].

David (the familiar name used deliberately here) welcomes people to his website as though he has just opened the front door to his home: "Welcome to the Gurteen Knowledge Website. My name is David Gurteen and this is a very personal site that is primarily a resource for the Gurteen Knowledge Community. Everything on this site is open and you do not need to be a member to access any part of it or subscribe to any of the services provided."

David eschews 'marketing hype' websites and those that harvest e-mail addresses before opening the door to content. The Gurteen Knowledge Website provides a wealth of information and knowledge including book reviews, articles, people profiles, an event calendar, inspirational quotations, an integral knowledge log (blog) and more on subjects that include knowledge management, learning, creativity, innovation and personal mastery.

### Knowledge Log

The Gurteen Knowledge Log is a casual weblog in which David talks about items of interest that he's found on the Web, experiences or insights he thinks his readers might find useful. The content is mainly, but not strictly, limited to the area of knowledge management and learning.

"Like the rest of my site," Gurteen says, "it's an eclectic mix." And it isn't always about the standard Gurteen themes. In his blog message of April 22, 2008, a quote from a fellow blogger set him off:

"I am a documentary junkie – the UK History Channel and other documentary and news channels are pretty much all I watch. But time and time again I get angry when I see the programme makers turn the problems facing the world into entertainment.

"What I have long wanted media companies to do is to start taking the problems seriously and move from saying 'isn't it tragic', isn't it crazy to 'here is what you can do to help solve them. And this is what we are setting up to help support you.'"

But Gurteen looks instead to a participatory web. "In 50 years time I think we will look back at old news clips and documentaries of today in a similar way we look back at the propaganda newsreels of the Second World War and wonder why so many people at the time did not see things for what they were."

### Articles, publications and more

David Gurteen has been a fixture in *Inside Knowledge* magazine since August 2006. His *Gurteen Perspective* is found in the first few pages of each edition and – in keeping with his open approach to communication – the column is unlocked on the magazine's website.

*IK* is his prime print medium but he also writes occasional articles for other professional publications in the UK, US and Australia.

Gurteen also holds two-day workshops on building a knowledge sharing culture, geared toward inspiring attendees to put into motion ideas that will make a difference in their organisations. Additionally, there are the keynote speeches, presentations, talks and chairing of conferences. As Gurteen says, "I love to meet people and to network and am always looking for opportunities to do so."

Gurteen also makes extensive use of social tools to help grow and support his community. Not only is there his blog but also e-mail and RSS feeds including his popular 'Knowledge Quote of the Day'. He also makes effective use of tools such as Flickr, YouTube, Dopplr, Twitter and others. In sum, it could be said that Gurteen is the benchmark for knowledge sharing. His contributions to the knowledge fields are equal or greater than those of entire organisations. Yet, he is but one man. Now that you really know him, you are likely to take issue with the opening paragraph of this article. He's not 'the David' but the disarming Goliath of the knowledge business. ■

*To learn more about the Gurteen Knowledge Community go to <http://www.gurteen.com>. Contact David Gurteen at [david.gurteen@gurteen.com](mailto:david.gurteen@gurteen.com).*