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Keep the talk flowing

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XTRA OFFICE SILOS

KEEP THE TALK FLOWING

Specialisation is good, but blurring the edges between various groups can add to productivity

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WE KNOW a lot. By "we", I mean humanity as a whole. We know so much that it is impossible for any one of us to know more than a fraction of our total knowledge. This is why we specialise.

Specialisation is good. It lets us go deep into a specific field of endeavour, but at the expense of a broad overview of everything. Specialisation is expected of professionals. You wouldn't be happy if you found out that your dentist is, in fact, a well-known philosopher as well. Or that your child's ENT (ear, nose and throat) surgeon secretly teaches astrophysics in the local university.

But isn't there a danger lurking behind our habit of demanding super specialised silos of knowledge? One obvious danger is the loss of synergy and potential innovation.

A case in point — a particle physicist at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (Cern) faces the problem of accessing various files on different networks. Being conversant in computing issues, the physicist devises a nice way of describing the file (or, as it is known now, the resource) and suddenly the first URL (Universal Resource Locator) is born. The rest is history — we have the World Wide Web, the Internet, and so on. Fifteen years later, you have e-commerce and YouTube!

If Cern had insisted that their physicists do only physics and leave their computing problems to the IT department, the Internet may not have materialised. Or, it may have taken a lot longer.

The need for specialisation is not limited to individuals. It permeates into the modern workplace in the form of a typical division of labour such as human resources, finance, IT and business. This division has worked well for ages.

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But every so often, the expertise in such silos becomes so split and scattered that the organisation loses sight of its basic objective. People in the silos begin work against each other, competing for resources and recognition, rather than collaborating for common success.

The most common pariah in a typical organisation is the IT department. These poor folks always get shouted at if anything at all goes wrong in the system. But when everything is working fine, nobody even notices them.

In today's age of ubiquitous computer literacy, why not assume a bit of system responsibility so the turnaround time in PC troubleshooting (and productivity) can be improved?

When it comes to computers, there is no limit to how bad things can get. As the IT proverb says, to err is human, but to completely foul up things requires a computer. End users may screw up the system so completely that even a competent IT department (a rare commodity) may find it impossible to restore normalcy.

But to fight this self-destructive (though well-intentioned) tendency, IT departments have gone to the other extreme of making it so bureaucratic and practically impossible to get their help in anything at all!

Another group with a bad rap is auditors. Their thankless job is to look over everybody's shoulder and make sure they are following the rules of the game (or rather, complying with policies and regulations).

Auditors' noble intentions get eclipsed by one fatal flaw: they seem to measure their success by how many violations they can find. Instead of working hand in hand with those being audited, the auditors come across as though they are conspiring against the rest.

There is productivity to be gained by blurring the edges of rigid silos in organisations. When silos talk to each other, teamwork happens and those in the various groups will realise they all work towards a common goal.

The writer is author of the internationally-acclaimed book, The Unreal Universe: A Study in Applied Spirituality. A scientist from Cern, Dr Manoj currently works in quantitative finance in Singapore.