



# Serendipitous Conversation

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*Adapted from*  
*“Practical Projects in Legal KM:  
a year of living knowledgeably”*

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# Letter from the Author

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elcome to this mini ebook on Serendipitous Conversation.

I hope you find it useful. It is an adapted extract from my [latest textbook](#), published in 2015 by Legal Monitor.

I really enjoyed writing "[KM Handbook](#)" for The Law Society, trying to decode academic theory into something practical and easy to read, but I have always been aware how difficult it is for time-poor KM-ers in law firms to take that theory and use it to improve knowledge flows within their organisations.

For this reason I wrote a book of 12 simple projects that would suit most professional services firms and could be pursued without significant investment. In this way, I hope to gift you "*a year of living knowledgeably*".

Each project in the book contains straightforward suggestions for implementation, with templates, alternative projects, flow charts, precedents, metrics and further relevant reading.

This adapted version of project 5 is also based on a Knowledge Network UK training event. KN-UK is a knowledge sharing and networking group for law firm KM-ers. [You can find out more here](#).

Best of luck  
*Hélène*

# Serendipitous Conversations

*Q “How can an organisation transfer knowledge effectively?”*

*A “Hire smart people and let them talk to one another.”*

*Davenport and Prusak*

**T**acit knowledge is an extremely valuable asset within organisations, particularly Knowledge Intensive Firms (KIFs) such as law firms . Tacit knowledge is best transferred through conversation and when employees work alongside each other.

Unfortunately, as organisations grow, their employees often become more specialised, pushed into silos, and less likely to know staff in other departments. This hinders the transfer of valuable tacit knowledge and the questioning of norms by those outside silos, limiting competitive advantage due to innovative thinking.

Conversations, despite their many benefits to organisations, are often overlooked in law firms, particularly where there is a strong focus on time-based measurement (chargeable hours and billings) rather than value to the client. RCTs and other similar projects are a means of promoting and legitimising conversations within the organisation.

*Tacit knowledge is  
best transferred  
through  
conversation...*





### Key success requirements:

1. Top down support for time spent on these conversations
2. Avoid trying to control the conversations

## Project Outline

This is an extremely simple project, which could work in just about any organisation.

The project is means of formalising and encouraging conversations outside usual hierarchies and networks. The Red Cross Red Crescent has produced a great video which you can find on YouTube explaining their RCT programme to potential participants .

No specialist equipment is necessary, although you could choose to invest in an outsourced solution or buy in expertise and/or tools to streamline the process if you wish.

If you “DIY” you will need to invest some time in creating the random connections and, of course, support those taking part and encourage everyone to value the time spent on these conversations.

# What is an “RCT”?

Random Coffee Trials (RCTs) formally began at Nesta, a charity committed to helping people to bring great ideas to life. When intern Michael Soto met Jon Kingsbury, Director of Creative Economy Programmes, he had a number of great ideas to share, but it was his idea for RCTs that struck Jon most.

The RCT programme was a means to institutionalise serendipitous conversation: randomly matching volunteers who committed to meeting up for 30 minutes or so to have coffee and talk to each other. Michael and Jon named the conversation programme “Random Coffee Trials” as a play on “Randomised Control Trials”.

Michael and Jon used email and a simple webpage to spread the word about the programme and invite employees to opt in. They used a spreadsheet to randomise matches between participants and then sent out a weekly email inviting the matches to grab a coffee and have a conversation. The content of the conversation was not controlled. There was no agenda or goal and there was no need to report on the content of the conversation or create any knowledge artefacts.

After four months or so, Michael and Jon surveyed staff to see if they felt the programme was a useful one. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Participants valued the legitimacy the programme gave to the time spent on conversation, even those which weren't directly work related, noting that there had still been direct beneficial impacts on various projects and programmes. They also noted the programme's effectiveness at breaking silos, revealing links within the organisation and encouraging collaboration. Jon and Michael also noted that participants were less likely to cancel an RCT coffee when they were busy, than they would cancel a social catch up.



## **What are the benefits?**

*RCTs and similar programmes enable people to connect with each other in a random fashion across an organisation, facilitating:*

- *breaking of silos*
- *sharing of best practice across groups*
- *unearthing unexpected synergies*
- *sparking innovation through interactions which challenge the status quo*
- *building of relationships and networks*
- *increasing the numbers of weak social bonds*
- *building trust (which improves cross selling and knowledge sharing)*
- *sharing of tacit knowledge*

# Implementation

How you implement this idea within your organisation, as with so many of the projects within **“A Year of Living Knowledgeably”**, depends on your budget and the size and nature of your organisation.

I describe two methods (DIY and Outsourced) and you can use your common sense to adapt these for your own purposes, as there will be adaptations available in between these methods.

## In essence, this is how DIY works:

**1. Invite people to join the programme and promote its value to the organisation.**

**2. Anyone interested in taking part sends their contact details to an administrator.**

**3. The administrator collects the names of volunteers and randomly pairs people up.**

**3. The pairs then have their coffee and a 20-30 minute chat which is usually, but not exclusively, work-related, at a time/place that suits them. For international businesses, the conversation takes place as a video conference call, such as Skype.**

**4. That's it! Rinse and repeat. Assess how the project is working and adapt as necessary or publicise its success after a few months.**



## Outsourced solutions

The simplest option is, of course, to hand over all responsibility for arranging the project to an organisation which will deal with everything for you.

At the time of writing, I'm aware of the following organisations which undertake the administration of programmes such as this. I'm sure there are other similar organisations, so do your own research to find the right one for you:

- *Lunch Roulette*
- *Coffee Who*
- *Spark Collaboration*  
founded by Michael Soto

These organisations will usually market the RCT-type programme internally for you and match your volunteers, ensuring random matches and avoiding duplication of matches (an aspect that Michael Soto says he eventually found difficult using his spreadsheet method at Nesta).

Don't assume that an outsourced solution will be the most costly option. Although this is a simple project which shouldn't take a lot of your time, the value of an outsourced solution depends on the opportunity cost of your time. You will know whether administering a programme such as this in-house is time well-spent or not.

## Inviting people to join in

The most successful of these projects rely on people volunteering to become involved. It is difficult to give up valuable fee earning or working time to have coffee and conversation with a random person if you don't see any value in the project. For this reason, I do not recommend that you simply transfer the names of all your staff members from your HR database to your list of participants for matching. Keep everyone informed about the project and encourage them, but do not mandate participation.

There is no particularly special way to invite people to join a programme such as this, but you may want to consider the following:

- Will your email have more weight, and hence maximise participation levels, if it comes from a person who can demonstrate that the programme has the support of senior management? At Nesta Jon took responsibility for inviting staff to join their scheme because he did not want them to ignore a request from Michael, the intern.
- Do you want to include just fee earners, or all members of staff? It may be tempting to limit participation to fee earners, but there could be significant value in linking fee earners more widely. You do not know who or what everyone knows. Your receptionist could be a part-time entrepreneur and keen to share her insights as the client of a competitor.
- How will you encourage participation? A video, such as that by the Red Cross Red Crescent works really well (people often struggle with the simplicity of this project) or, true to the project's essence, you could book coffee with a number of random people and let the word spread.

## Randomly matching people

The RCTs at Nesta originally ran weekly and a spreadsheet was used to randomly match people up. Each Friday people were given the names of their matches for a conversation during the following week. This is probably too frequent for most law firms, when a monthly meeting would suffice. This will also help you to avoid duplicate matches too often (a reason many people opt for an outsourced version of this project).

If you have multiple offices, you will also want to decide whether you will match people across the offices and encourage them to video conference their conversation.

There are many ways to match people. Nesta used a spreadsheet and I've included a link in "Further Resources" which will show you how to match people randomly using Excel. You can also draw names out of a hat. That could be a real hat, with real paper slips with names on, or a virtual online hat such as Virtual Hat Draw or Drawnames.com.





# Measure your Success

*“Not everything that counts can be counted; not everything that can be counted, counts” Einstein*

Measuring any KM project is a difficult matter. In general I recommend a mix of qualitative and quantitative, leading and lagging measurements. What measurements suit your organization will depend on its size, your budget and the measurements you already collect.

When I discussed the RCT programme with Michael Soto (March 2015) he explained that he and Jon opted to measure the success or otherwise of their programme through a survey with plenty of open questions. He and Jon felt that it was important not to formalise the programme too much, to control the conversations or require the parties to report back after each coffee, but they did need to know if the programme was delivering their aim of introducing more serendipitous conversations to the workplace to help with networks and the sharing of knowledge. This seems like an excellent method of evaluating your own programme.

**I would counsel against too many quantitative measures,** as you will wish to avoid any gaming, although you may want to measure how many meetings were cancelled or deferred and give people the simple option of ranking the value of the experience out of 10.

I would also advise against surveying participants too frequently. A survey after 4-6 months will check whether or not the programme is on the right lines. This could be repeated annually or incorporated into your usual annual survey/review of KM activity. Remember to allow plenty of free textboxes in your survey which will help to elicit accurate information about the project and also hopefully help you to collect inspiring stories about the value participants gained from the conversations, so that you have valuable marketing material to keep interest in the programme going in the future.

# Alternative Projects

**According to David Gurteen, the following organisations are experimenting with an RCT-type programme:**

- Nesta
- Cabinet Office (UK)
- Scottish Government (UK)
- Royal Society of Arts (UK)
- KHDA (Dubai) (called Shareachino sessions)
- Mars (UK)
- 4Ps Marketing (UK)
- Surrey County Council (UK)
- National Audit Office (UK)
- MWH Global (UK)
- BAE Systems (US)
- SABMiller (UK) (called Random Beer Collaborations)
- Red Cross Red Crescent (Global)
- Bank of England (UK) (called CoffeeFours, matching four people together)
- Linklaters (UK)
- NatCen Social Research (UK)
- The British Library
- UK Trade and Investment (UKTI)
- Aberdeenshire Council, Scotland

There is no need for the random conversation to take place over coffee and there is no magic in limiting meetings to pairs.

You can link people for lunch and increase the numbers at the meetings, although if you have too many people, the conversation risks becoming a series of monologues. From experience, four appears to be the maximum number that works for this type of project.

## Lunch Roulette, RBCs & CoffeeFours

There are a number of other organisations doing similar programmes which you can investigate and take inspiration from.

SABMiller do “random beer collaborations” and the Bank of England does “CoffeeFours” (where four people meet for coffee once a month). Other organisations have a “lunch roulette”, which is similar to RCTs, but the meeting is slightly longer and takes place over lunch.



*If you want to learn more about RCTs and the value of conversation for the transfer of knowledge within your organization, there are lots of further resources available. I think these are a great place to start.*

## Further Resources

### Textbooks

Davenport and Prusak (2000) "Working Knowledge" Harvard Business School Press: Boston

Russell, H. (2011) "[Knowledge Management Handbook](#)" Law Society Publishing: London

### Papers, reports and websites

Exceljet, "How to pick names out of a hat with excel" accessed July 2015 <https://exceljet.net/tips/how-to-pick-names-out-of-a-hat-with-excel>

Govloop "RCTs in government" accessed July 2015 <https://www.govloop.com/community/blog/rcts-government-thats-randomised-coffee-trials>

Gurteen, D. (2014) "Randomised Coffee Trials" accessed July 2015  
<http://www.gurteen.com/gurteen/gurteen.nsf/id/rcts>

Health Education North West, (2014) "Fancy a brew?" accessed July 2015  
<https://nw.hee.nhs.uk/2014/09/18/fancy-a-brew-randomised-coffee-trials>

Soto, M. "Institutionalising serendipity via productive coffee breaks" accessed July 2015  
<http://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/institutionalising-serendipity-productive-coffee-breaks>



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Tacit knowledge is the most valuable but difficult to reach knowledge within an organisation.

How can your organisation harness the value of its tacit knowledge in a simple, cost-effective way?

Conversation is a much-overlooked tool for the transfer of knowledge, and a project such as this “RCT” project will not only encourage conversation for the passing of valuable tacit knowledge, but also help to break silos by providing cross-boundary networking opportunities.

This is an extremely simple project which should suit any knowledge intensive organisation such as a law firm.

***“Conversations are the way workers discover what they know, share it with their colleagues, and in the process create new knowledge for the organisation. In the new economy, conversations are the most important form of work ...” Alan Webber***