

# Inquiring Minds Want to Know



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**Resource Type:** Risk eNews

**Topic:** General

This week I've been reading *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*, by Tom Nichols. In this thought-provoking and provocative book, Nichols mourns how expertise has been devalued and dismissed, replaced with dangerous "intellectual egalitarianism."

Early in the book, Nichols explores the confirmation bias: the tendency to look for or interpret information in a fashion that affirms earlier conclusions or preconceptions. We've written in a [previous issue of the Risk eNews](#) that confirmation bias in the workplace can cause nonprofit leaders to fail to objectively identify and consider the risks associated with an exciting or promising new venture. Nichols explains that confirmation bias is a feature, not a failure, in a risky world: confirmation bias stems from the will to survive. If Jane Doe believes motorcycles are dangerous, she probably could not be convinced otherwise, and she will look for information that confirms the danger she already believes in. Nichols explains that, "We are gripped by irrational fear rather than irrational optimism because confirmation bias, is, in a way, a kind of survival mechanism... Your intellect, operating on limited or erroneous information, is doing its job, trying to minimize any risk to your life, no matter how small. When we fight confirmation bias, we're trying to correct for a basic function—a feature, not a bug—of the human mind."

## In the Know, or Not

A basic truth explained in the book is that each of us needs to rely on what we know to simply make it through an ordinary day. It isn't possible—or safe—to begin each day with a clean slate. If we began each day with a mind wiped clean of memories, we'd spend hours trying to program the coffee maker and never put the jolt of caffeine to good use. We might burn our hands on hot stoves every day, needing to re-learn that the hot stove causes pain.

But instead of relying solely on what we already know, Nichols invites us to find ways to inject new knowledge—into the enormous gaps in what we know. He reminds us that becoming more knowledgeable takes more than a few clicks and a fraction of a second. He writes that most laypeople haven't been taught—or perhaps we've forgotten—the basics of the scientific method: the steps that "lead from a general question to a hypothesis, testing, and analysis." Perhaps most dangerous, in many cases we improperly use the word *evidence* to refer to the things we perceive, rather than truly know to be true.

## Critical Thinking Cap

In his chapter on higher education, Nichols writes that colleges and universities are “failing to provide the ability to recognize expertise and to engage productively with experts and other professionals in daily life.” “The most important of these intellectual capabilities, and the one most under attack in American universities, is critical thinking: the ability to examine new information and competing ideas dispassionately, logically, and without emotional or personal preconceptions.”

Nichols points to the immediacy and informality of email as possible causes of the “eroding respect for experts and their abilities” and the disappearing distinction between “the students who ask questions and teachers who answer them.” During my first experience teaching an online class in nonprofit risk management, I assigned a C grade to a student whose poorly written, off-topic paper deserved an F. Within hours of grading the paper, I noticed a series of angry posts on the course site. The student’s comments were along the lines of “this professor is an idiot,” and “I’ve never received less than an A in my life; there’s clearly something wrong with her!” I did feel a bit idiotic having skipped the learning management system’s instructions about how to restrict or at least preview student comments before allowing them to appear as content on the course site.

At NRMCM we’ve observed our clients—and ourselves—putting up walls of resistance to new information, competing ideas, and critical feedback. Critical thinking is key in all aspects and all phases of a nonprofit’s lifecycle, including a risk that is common to all organizations: the potential that a team member will depart for greener or different pastures. CEOs fear succession planning because we worry it could signal our boards that we intend to leave. Boards fear succession planning because they worry it could signal the CEO that her services may no longer be needed. A friend of mine recently told me that he was offended when his new supervisor asked him to “train me how to do your job.” He felt the fear of being replaceable. I was excited when the Land Trust Alliance, an NRMCM [Affiliate Member](#), asked me to design and deliver a workshop, “How to Keep Organizational Knowledge from Walking Out the Door.” In that session I’ll explore the human side of knowledge management and practical ways to download, preserve, and honor what a team knows for the long-term benefit of the nonprofit’s mission. If you want to download learning from NRMCM, [explore our speaking engagements](#) and services.

## The Internet Made Me Know It

In his chapter titled “Let Me Google That for You,” Nichols explores the theory that the Internet is to blame for the death of expertise. “People who once had to ask the advice of specialists in any given field now plug search terms into a browser and get answers in seconds.” In Nichols’ view, the “Internet has accelerated the collapse of communication between experts and laypeople by offering an apparent shortcut to erudition. It allows people to mimic intellectual accomplishment by indulging in an illusion of expertise by a limitless supply of facts.”

Nichols’ arguments might seem cynical, especially when we consider the value of [collective knowledge](#), but Nichols does remind us to filter and vet the information we so rapidly, effortlessly consume.

I’m also reminded that not all questions have specific or concrete answers. Lately the NRMCM team has been wrestling with risk questions that have no clear answers. Some of our expert colleagues are unable to pinpoint answers for us, or a panel of experts will individually present their own analysis. Even experts are biased by their own past experiences, and experts sometimes tell clients what they want to hear. New information is discovered each day, so expertise itself might be fleeting, and is clearly a lifelong pursuit.

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