The Death of Expertise

Idea In Short

Hostility to established knowledge is growing, driven by hubris, information overload and filter bubbles. Consultants should counter it with data, intellectual curiosity, humility and a deliberately diverse information diet.

A Book That Names the Problem

Tom Nichols wrote Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters to explain a troubling trend. Nichols argues the issue is not indifference to established knowledge but the emergence of a positive hostility to it. He calls this unprecedented and dangerous. The sentiment resonates because we see it daily. People have grown anesthetized to facts, data, expertise and science. Instead, they listen only to pundits who preach their worldview and assume others are idiots or biased. Worse, opinions calcify and become immovable. 1

Hubris Feeds the Cycle

The first factor is hubris. We think we are smarter and better than we really are. Everyone suffers from some overestimation effect. Worse, the Dunning-Kruger effect describes how people with low ability in an area cannot recognize their own incompetence. The result is confident ignorance. Hubris makes people trust their gut over decades of accumulated expertise, and it shuts down the curiosity required to learn. 2

Too Much Noise Online

With the world's information at our fingertips through search engines and voice assistants, it is natural to feel smarter. Data is a commodity, available everywhere. Yet written words on the internet, voices on AM radio and photos on social media are data, not understanding or insight. Data sits at the bottom of a pyramid that rises through information, understanding,

insight and wisdom. Nichols argues that unlimited information is making us dumber, and the evidence supports him. Access to facts is not the same as the disciplined thinking that turns facts into judgment.

Disappointment With Experts

Experts are human and they let us down. They can lie, be wrong and be self-serving. Recent scandals among government officials, bankers, priests, lawyers, consultants and auditors reinforce the cynicism. That said, reading about one expert being wrong does not invalidate all established science and management practice. Extrapolating from a few bad apples is a sampling error. The self-correcting nature of expert communities, where peers review and challenge results, remains the best mechanism we have for distinguishing reliable knowledge from noise.

Limited Information and Filter Bubbles

Everyone likes to be right. No one wants to drive to work, listen to the news and hang out with friends while debating constantly. So people self-select news, friends and information that suit their worldview. This creates safe, biased and insular intellectual cocoons. Democracies are noisy places, and we should be willing, eager and motivated to engage in debate. Our information diet is poor. We typically eat only the information we want. The fix is uncomfortable but necessary: visit news sites you disagree with and try to understand where they are coming from.

Lack of Civility Erodes Trust

This is a major issue. The best ideas should surface to the top, but diversity only works when there is trust. Without trust, diversity leads to fighting and chaos. The distance and anonymity of the internet creates massive distrust. Conversations become exhausting, and public debate over almost everything devolves into trench warfare. Civility is not optional decoration. It is the precondition that lets opposing views collide productively instead of violently.

What This Means for Consultants

Consultants are in the business of taking disparate, messy data and telling a story

executives can use to make change. This often means breaking through intransigent factions irrationally tied to their point of view. Use data to break through. Nurture intellectual curiosity in yourself and your teams. Ambition and skills carry you halfway through a career, but curiosity and the pride of ownership carry you the rest of the way. Be aware of false equivalents. Finding something online that argues against decades of proven science does not make it true, proven or provable. Watch your information diet by subscribing to at least one news show or radio station you disagree with. Stress test your thinking. Nichols said it best: learning new things requires patience and the ability to listen to other people. 3

Stay Humble and Keep Learning

There is a lot to learn, and it does not end with a Master of Business Administration [MBA]. Once you stop learning, you start getting old. The documentary Best of Enemies, which chronicles the 1968 debates between William F. Buckley Jr. and Gore Vidal, shows how the grandfathers of punditry foreshadowed 50 years of political talk television. Buckley warned of an implicit conflict between that which is highly viewable and that which is highly illuminating. That tension remains the core challenge for anyone trying to separate expertise from entertainment. Stay humble, keep learning and let data do the persuading.

How Consultants Model the Cure

Consultants can demonstrate a healthier relationship with expertise in how they run engagements. They cite their sources, show their sample sizes and openly state the limits of their analysis. They invite clients to challenge the data rather than demanding blind trust. When new evidence contradicts a hypothesis, they revise the recommendation instead of defending the original position. This transparency contrasts with the punditry Nichols criticizes, where certainty is rewarded and correction is punished. Consultants who model intellectual humility give clients permission to do the same inside their own organizations. The result is decisions grounded in evidence rather than ego, which is exactly the outcome expertise is meant to produce.

The Cost of Confident Ignorance

Confident ignorance is expensive in ways that rarely show up on a single invoice. Decisions made against expert consensus compound into failed projects, missed risks and eroded credibility. Teams that dismiss data lose the ability to course-correct early, because they

have already rejected the signals that would warn them. The Dunning-Kruger effect makes this self-reinforcing, since the least competent feel the most certain. Breaking the cycle requires leaders who reward intellectual humility and treat revision as a sign of strength. Organizations that price confident ignorance accurately, in lost time and rework, find the discipline to listen again.

- 1The Death Of Expertise Argues That The Rejection Of Experts, Fueled By The Internet, Higher Education Trends And Media Fragmentation, Threatens Informed Debate And Democracy
- 2The Dunning-Kruger Effect Is A Cognitive Bias In Which People With Low Ability Overestimate Their Competence, Inflating Misplaced Confidence
- 3The Second Edition Of The Death Of Expertise Updates The Thesis, Arguing That Attacks On Expertise Have Intensified And Now Underpin Populist Political Movements

Summary

Expertise is under siege from hubris, noise, disappointment and incivility. Consultants break through with data, nurture curiosity, reject false equivalents and stay humble. Keep learning, because the day you stop is the day you start falling behind.