

I was fascinated to recently learn of Francis Galton's 'Vox Populi', an article he wrote in 1907 based upon his observations of a competition at a farmer's fair in Plymouth the previous year.

The competition involved participants guessing the weight of a particular ox by entering the weight on a purchased ticket for the chance to win a prize. Some 787 people entered and Galton was sufficiently intrigued by the variety of guesses that he collected up all the tickets after the competition and analysed the results. His statistical analysis makes fascinating reading but in my mind one fact stands out in particular.

The average of all the guesses was not only closer than any single guess but was remarkably only 1lb short of the 1198 lbs that the ox weighed. Given the breadth of the distribution of guesses this really is quite fascinating.

The exercise was recently replicated, albeit with fewer entrants and the same results were observed. The average of the guesses being closer than any single guess and on this occasion the average being 7 kilos way from the actual weight of 584 kilos. The range of guesses in this second exercise was between 200 and 1400 kilos and yet collectively the group's average was still more accurate than any other guess (including those of expert farmers).

For me, this begs the question as to whether we sufficiently capitalise upon the wisdom of crowds in the workplace. Whilst I am acutely aware of the beneficial effect of group synergy when generating ideas and concepts, I am convinced the effects can be harnessed in other ways.

I would love to hear your comments on the above and if you would be interested in taking part in some form of research to determine the potential benefits of the wisdom of crowds, do please get in touch.

About the author:- Tim Rusling runs Problem Engineering + Behavioral Science, a consultancy and training organization with a focus on making thinking as productive as possible. He works with organizations helping them to unleash the thinking capability of their employees. Having worked globally, he has helped clients generate high volumes of ideas and concepts, solve the toughest of problems and innovate. He is author of the book 'Systematic Innovation'.

Contact details:

www.problem-engineering.com
tim@problem-engineering.com
m. +44 (0)7901 910645