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# Compare the meerkat and the lawyer



By Gillian Tett

Looking at animal behaviour for insights into corporate life is just another example of silo busting, a practice that is becoming all the rage



**D**o lawyers have something important to learn from meerkats? Is their behaviour similar to that of the naked mole rat? That question might sound like the preamble to a bar joke. But not so, if Hugh Crisp, a veteran English lawyer is to be believed.

For the first 30 years of his career, Crisp worked as a senior City of London lawyer, rising to the hallowed position of managing partner of the esteemed Freshfields law firm. But these days, Crisp has moved into a new career, teaching business, law and management skills at the Said Business School in Oxford. And that has prompted him to take an unusual track: these days he is brainstorming with zoologists at Oxford university to analyse the secrets of what makes a 21st-century global law firm work. In particular, Crisp is convinced that the behaviour of naked mole rats, meerkats or even bees can shed a great deal of light on corporate life.

While 21st-century students tend to presume that modern economic life (like the animal kingdom) is driven by an individualistic survival instinct and profit motive, Crisp thinks this assumption is wrong. Instead, as he explained to me last week, law firms only work if there is an intense collaboration and group spirit. He adds that this spirit is widely found in the animal kingdom too, particularly among creatures such as the meerkat. Armed with a copy of a book called *An Introduction to*

*Behavioral Ecology*, this is the message he is trying to teach to business and law students.

As endeavours go, this one is fascinating in its own right (even, or especially, for human lawyers). However, it is also noteworthy as part of a much bigger trend. One way to describe Crisp's effort to apply zoology to business education is that it is a form of "silo busting" – the art of taking insights that have been developed in one institutional department or intellectual silo, and applying them somewhere else. If you look across the academic world these days, as well as in corporate life, it seems that silo busting is becoming all the rage.

Last month for example, I met senior officials from Chicago university who explained how they are scrambling to force different departments to collaborate with each other and, in particular, with the students who are studying at the university's wildly popular "entrepreneurship" course. At the Aspen Ideas festival, I listened to fascinating presentations from Joi Ito, head of the MIT Media Lab: this initiative, which grew out of the architecture department, aims to force different types of researchers and entrepreneurs to collide with each other. Or as Ito says, the endeavour that is "not so much interdisciplinary, but anti-disciplinary", since it busts traditional definitions of research and entrepreneurship.

Similar initiatives are under way elsewhere, such as the Krasnow Institute at the George Mason University in Virginia, not to mention longer-standing centres such as the Santa Fe Institute or Palo Alto Research Centre. Some foundations, such as the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, are also funding silo-busting research: one recent case from Sloan is an initiative to combine the work of marine biologists with computer programmers to create a sort of "Google fish" system for tracking sea life.

Silo busting is spreading into institutional quarters as well. At the Bank of England, economists such as Andy Haldane have collaborated with zoologists such as Robert May to study financial stability. At Bristol University and Carnegie Mellon, researchers are studying the parallels between nuclear science and financial markets, in tandem with some military groups. At the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in Long Island, there have recently been brainstorming sessions between statisticians, economists and medical researchers to develop innovative ways to measure and tackle cancer care. And these are just the examples I know of – countless others undoubtedly exist, too.

If you want to be cynical, it is possible to argue that some of this activity is mere tokenism, or just a statistical aberration. After all, for every example of "silo jumping" occurring in a university, government department or company today, there are numerous counter examples, where tunnel vision and tribalism predominate, and may be growing in power. The structure of most academic careers and research grants reinforces intellectual silos, and the growing complexity of technical operations in government and corporate

bureaucracies tends to give “specialists” entrenched power. If employees or researchers are going to jump across boundaries, they need resources, or “slack”, and that tends to vanish at times of economic pain.

But there again, history suggests that the most powerful forms of innovation tend to happen when silo busting does occur. What defines whether a group or individual will be successful is whether somebody is mastered and trapped by silos – or can master and reorder them as needs and opportunities arise. So I, for one, applaud Crisp’s intellectual exploration with meerkats, and other aspects of zoology, particularly after his three-decade career. Who knows whether those mammals really can teach lawyers something; but we all have reason to look at the world with fresh eyes. Indeed, in that spirit I would love to hear of any other examples where individuals or institutions are trying to “silo bust”; if nothing else, it could help broaden my own mind beyond the media world. Even without any mole rats.

[gillian.tett@ft.com](mailto:gillian.tett@ft.com)

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