

## Learning to lead knowledge-sharing initiatives: time for change for information professionals

There is considerable agreement that information and knowledge are the lifeblood of organizations. One wonders then why information services and information professionals are almost never considered “core” in their organizations. The increasing focus on knowledge-sharing initiatives provides information professionals with an opportunity to play a crucial role – not only in the content management area, but also in the other pillars of “knowledge management”: organizational change and the intelligent use of technology. Libraries and information services cannot continue to be passive repositories of knowledge. However, in order to be considered as essential and not just occasionally useful, they need to move to a new mode of operation that involves creating and/or improving information. Information professionals need to develop new skills that will help them to assist their organizations in reaching their goals. There is an opportunity to seize these new roles and find innovative approaches to information management and knowledge sharing, otherwise others will take on these tasks and run with them.

Many organizations are deploying new methods, systems and management techniques to encourage knowledge sharing and are seeing some concrete benefits including faster project implementation, more insightful decision-making based on concrete facts and data – not anecdotal – understanding of issues and increased efficiency. Both public and private organizations are recognizing the need to capture some of the institutional knowledge that otherwise walks out the door every time an experienced employee retires or leaves the organization. Recycling and reusing information and knowledge leads to collective intelligence and greater efficiency for the organization and its clients. Information professionals need to think beyond bibliographic information and get involved in leveraging their organizations’ intellectual capital.

### New directions, new skills

Leveraging knowledge in organizations is not just information management redefined, nor is knowledge management an old idea repackaged. It is about creating value and knowledge from the intangible assets within organizations and facilitating access to key resources and expertise. Going beyond bibliographic, codified information is the new challenge for the information profession. “Working with knowledge” involves encouraging innovation and facilitating learning through sharing to create new useable ideas, products, processes and services. Managing content, synthesising and analysing and

packaging information are the new roles for information professionals.

Clients want specific bits of data and information – not reams of it - which they can quite easily locate themselves. Information professionals need to become more discriminating about the use of the tools of their trade, knowing when process and control serve a useful purpose, and when these become rigid impediments to creative change. A new outlook requires a high degree of objectivity and innovation that is difficult to accomplish within the traditional library setting. Working outside the information management role, in other parts of the organization that are considered core business, is one way of acquiring new perceptions. “Learning by doing” remains one of the most effective ways of gaining new knowledge and seeing things from different points of view.

In all types of organizations new problems and issues have emerged in the last few years which require new working methods, different expertise and skills. Globalization and the increased access to information due to technological advances and the ubiquitous Internet has changed forever how we carry out our work and reach clients. Information management requirements have changed to take account of the desire of individuals to have more control over their own information. Clients expect information services and tools to facilitate “personal knowledge management”, streamlining storage and access to relevant information. Although expectations have changed, for the most part, skills of information professionals have not evolved to meet these new challenges.

The information business is similar to that of consulting firms that assist clients to move on to new directions and find innovative solutions to their problems. Information services should aim to have a measurable impact on core business. However, a considerable slice of the time is spent bogged down with process and procedures, leaving a limited percentage of work time focused on “core” activities – serving clients. Worse still, some information professionals have actually lost sight of what their missions and mandates are supposed to be, and view the process as the business. Competencies and skills for information professionals have been discussed in a variety of fora, including Aslib and SLA. A document produced by the latter association, “Competencies for special librarians of the 21st century”, provides a long list of professional competencies including inter alia:

- leads in the testing, selection an application of the latest technologies and tools for information delivery in the organization;
- manages the full life cycle of externally- and internally-produced information in the organization from creation to long-term preservation, storage or destruction;
- develops and manages convenient, accessible and cost-effective information services that are aligned

- with the strategic directions of the organization;
- develops and uses appropriate metrics to communicate the value of information services to senior management, key stakeholders and client groups;
- uses the best available evidence of what works to continually improve information sources and services.

Beyond this, however, is the ability and aptitude to create and support networks of expertise within organizations. Additionally, the promotion of knowledge sharing means identifying ways of bringing people together to encourage innovation. Rethinking the use of space in information services will also help change perceptions. Information centres might look for ideas from some of the more innovative booksellers (i.e. Barnes and Noble) who have created social gathering points within their shops.

### **An integrated approach**

Facilitating knowledge sharing encompasses three essential processes that are intricately linked: organizational learning, information management and information technology. An integrated approach in these areas is essential. Most information professionals are well-versed in the technology implications. However, they have often little understanding of how organizations learn concepts that may seem too abstract.

Human resources experts who focus on the need to change attitudes in the workplace and encourage knowledge sharing are often the champions of organizational learning. They aim to create a work environment that will facilitate this. The essential challenge is to turn tacit knowledge - that which cannot easily be written down or be codified - into useable information that can be shared in order to stimulate innovation and create new products and services. To accomplish this, attitudes toward sharing information and knowledge need to change. Taking the organizational learning route is an important component of effectively working with knowledge because of the implications for organizational change. Information professionals should join ranks with their human resources departments to work together on these issues.

Developing a knowledge-sharing strategy involves creating an integrated approach and finding the right balance in approach that leads to practical and definable outcomes. Information professionals who are able to see beyond the concept that information and knowledge can be codified and categorized should be at the forefront to lead this process.

### **Starting points**

What puzzles information professionals is "Where to start?" What does knowledge management mean

concretely for their organization? "Working with knowledge" involves continuous communication, and the sharing of expertise and ideas. The key to effecting change is to focus on concrete, tangible outputs. These frequently relate to operational improvements limited to a specific activity, process or function, for example:

- managing projects;
- launching new products or services;
- initiating new media campaigns;
- undertaking research and training;
- promoting continuous learning;
- identifying knowledge requirements in all core areas;
- improving access to knowledge and information inside and outside the organization;
- developing new knowledge repositories;
- minimising the time spent searching for information and knowledge;
- streamlining information flows; and
- understanding the needs of internal and external clients.

These tasks are an extension of those typically carried out by information professionals that emphasize the tacit rather than explicit forms of knowledge. This means accepting that there may not always be a systematic codified approach. Rather, a great deal of information and knowledge in organizations is always going to be ad hoc in nature. Encouraging the informal exchange of knowledge in a variety of ways is becoming a key new activity for libraries and information centres. Larry Prusak, the Executive Director of IBM's Institute for Knowledge-based Organizations and knowledge-sharing guru says about the future directions for libraries "... a piece of the answer must be a comfortable physical space in which to interact with other people. Perhaps the library, instead of housing documents (something that can be done with technology), can be the place that people can go to meet other people, more of a social space. This would be a really valuable thing." This is a trend that is already happening in many information resource centres, particularly in public libraries that have recognized a role for themselves as entertainment and community centres.

Intranets are frequently seen as one of the key activities within the scope of knowledge-sharing programmes. Unfortunately, however, few organizations are using intranets effectively for knowledge sharing. There is a recognition that intranets need to be redesigned to make them more intuitive and to encourage discussion and the sharing of ideas. Often IT departments or communication units have the organizational responsibility for intranets. It's curious to note that few libraries and information centres have taken over this responsibility. One wonders if intranets are seen as too crucial for internal communications to be relegated to information professionals. There is possibly an apprehension that

the intranet will be overly controlled and therefore not evolve as a knowledge-sharing tool. Information professionals need to do some soul searching to examine if new initiatives that should have become part of their work domain have been assigned to other departments within the organization, viewed as being more directly linked and attune to the core business.

### New mind set

One of the key challenges to organizations today is information overload which has resulted in the increased value and importance of cognitive skills including communicating, decision-making, persuasiveness, judgement and creativity. Knowledge-sharing initiatives attempt to address this problem by encouraging a new culture and mindset, which enables organizations to recognize their tangible and intangible resources and how they should be developed and managed. Technological transformation plays an important part in facilitating this change and represents a major investment, but it is not the most difficult aspect in the establishment of a knowledge management strategy. Achieving organizational change is a far more complex challenge, and it is this change process that is the imperative to reaching organizational goals. To play a role in finding new solutions to this problem, information professionals need to understand their organizational culture and work within it to find realistic, pragmatic approaches to knowledge sharing which will have a positive impact on the daily work routine. Whatever initiative is launched should have concrete results for the core business and individuals.

We preach the role and importance of information, but what is really required is "access to the right knowledge at the right time" (1). Information professionals need to stand back and reflect on the learning processes in organizations. The key to achieving the goals of information services is dependent on the capacity to reflect, innovate and change. This requires new ways of looking at things, involving more emphasis on facilitating the learning process in organizations, examining how decision-makers are influenced and understanding their learning styles. It also involves creating opportunities for socialization and the creation of networks and taking the lead in these initiatives.

Information professionals also need to develop a better understanding of the concepts of organizational behaviour in order to take an active part in the change process in their organizations. They must understand not only the client's stated information requirements, but also the organizational and personal issues driving them. The trend to more personalized information systems must be balanced with the requirement for common knowledge repositories in organizations. Information professionals should become the broker between these two imperatives and should assist in bridging the gaps.

An essential factor in launching a successful knowledge management strategy is that it integrates and forms part of the organization's strategic objectives. Unfortunately many knowledge management initiatives are viewed primarily as improving the use of information technology to streamline processes. This is only one part of the picture. Although senior managers realize intuitively that the core expertise of the organization and its strategic advantage comes from knowing more than its individual parts, there are few initiatives that explicitly make the link between knowledge and strategy. Information professionals need to take part in the strategic planning process in order to contribute to making this link. However, this means acquiring new skills, not the least of which is how to use business planning tools and methods.

### Leading: being there

Facilitating the sharing of tacit knowledge, as well as promoting coherent approaches to handling internal information, will provide the real added value to our organizations. Leading effectively with knowledge needs to be put on the management agenda and information professionals should be the people to put it there.

1 Keeping Good Company: A Conversation with Larry Prusak *Information Outlook* May 2001  
[http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_dls/mOFWE/5\\_5/75098169/p6/article.jhtml?term=](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/mOFWE/5_5/75098169/p6/article.jhtml?term=)

Linda Stoddart  
International Labour Office  
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## The final e-Diamond market validation, and the future of eTNA

The EU eTEN programme project, e-Diamond, that UKOLUG has been involved with over the last couple of years came to an end on the last day of January 2004. UKOLUG's principal role was to run the market validation. Initially this involved testing user reaction to the e-commerce model being proposed and more recently re-visiting some of those questions at the same time as we collected user responses to eTNA, the product itself.

eTNA – well the product was developed in Italy – stands for Electronic Trading Networked Architecture. It is an entirely new approach to marketing online, offering a single gateway and search engine access to a range of content suppliers as well as offering the added security of never having to enter personal and credit card information. When it is released, eTNA will develop into a network of suppliers, each with a range