

# Celebrating advances in information retrieval – the timeless conundrum

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On a work visit to London in November 2023 I made a detour to collect the Tony Kent Strix Award memorial statuette from the retiring Chair of the judging panel, Douglas Veal. Sadly, he passed away earlier this year. He dedicated years managing and promoting this prestigious accolade; a bronze owl captured in flight.



Veal was a member of the original working group that approached the [Institute of Information Scientists](#) (IIS) with the idea to honour the lifetime achievements of Dr. Tony Kent after his death in October 1997. The Award was inaugurated in 1998 by the IIS and is now presented by the UK e-information Group in partnership with the International Society for Knowledge Organisation UK Chapter (ISKO UK), the British Computer Society Information Retrieval Specialist Group (BCS IRSG) and the Royal Society of Chemistry Chemical Information and Computer Applications Group (RSC CICAG). It is a brilliant example of the importance of cross sectorial and organisational collaboration in information science and celebrates outstanding practical innovation and achievement in search and information retrieval.

## Celebrating luminaries

Inscribed on the base of the statuette are the names of the luminaries who have been presented with the award over the years, starting with Professor Stephen Robertson, City University in 1998 and most recently Martin White FBCS FRSC, HonFCLIP, Principal Analyst at SearchResearch Online (2023) and Nicola Ferro, Professor in Computer Science at the Department of Information Engineering, University of Padua (2024). White made UKeiG history by being presented with both the 2023 Strix and Jason Farradane awards. (Farradane is presented in recognition of his contribution to the wider library and information profession and the 2025 call for nominations is accessible [here](#)).

To complement the bronze statuette each winner is presented with a personal engraved glass trophy, and their names are added to a roll call published in the annual Tony Kent Strix memorial booklet. It's fascinating to review the rich history of the award during a period where AI is shaping a new paradigm of information retrieval and resource discovery. Intriguing also that Tony Kent's wise words are still ringing true today.

*'Making life easier for text-retrievers is a great objective. What is really required is a recognition that real literacy (as opposed to computer literacy) is a prerequisite for the effective use of information, and that computer technology can only, at best, provide gadgets that reduce drudgery.'*

## A man of many parts

The Strix working group consisted of Veal, Derek Barlow, Alan Gilchrist and Peter Vickers. 'Tony Kent was a man of many parts; a leader, an innovator, a teacher, and someone highly active in the international information scene. He made a major contribution to the development of information science and to information services in the UK and internationally.' Tony was a strong proponent of international cooperation and of sharing technological advances, a far-sighted vision in today's open-source world. His contribution to chemical information dissemination and retrieval, software development and programming expertise is extensive.

The Strix memorial booklet highlights the combination of skills and traits Tony Kent had to lead the way in information retrieval research and development. Veal recalled his inspiring and tremendous enthusiasm.

*'He was a man who saw the big picture. You need visionaries to see the way ahead, to drive things through and make them happen. He was a "can do" man, if he hit a snag, he would find a way round. He spoke to people, motivated them, encouraged them, and got them to do what he wanted and so got the best out of them.'*

Tony Kent was driven by the need to 'get on with the job of providing folk with systems that find the information that they want,' but was aware of the immense complexity of this task. 'If there is a central truth that can be identified in this field it is that there is not, and never will be, one best way of achieving the goal. Neither free text retrieval, nor classification, nor statistical analysis, nor weighted search, nor any of the 101 other ways doing things necessarily suffice on their own.'

*'I will no doubt be accused of elitism if I expressed my long-held view that the processes of information management and retrieval can never be simplified to a point where they may be conducted by half-wits (which is why incidentally it is a waste of time and effort to sweat blood*

*building pretty user interfaces and the like). Finding useful information is an intelligent process requiring intelligent people because at the end of the day only the intelligent can recognise what is useful.'*

## Compelling and eloquent

Many of these compelling and eloquent comments could be cited in library and information school exam questions to this day. Thought provoking. Playing the devil's advocate.

With Douglas Veal's death, and the retirement of esteemed colleagues Stella Dextre Clarke, Alan Gilchrist and Andrew Macfarlane we have a new judging panel carrying on the worthy Strix tradition. It consists of Dr Graham McDonald (University of Glasgow), Professor Marianne Lykke (Aalborg University), and Dr Samantha Pearman-Kanza (University of Southampton).

Information about all UKeiG's awards and bursaries is on the [UKeiG website](#), where you can also find the Memorial booklet and information about previous winners.

## A call for nominations for the 2025 Tony Kent Strix Award

Nominations must be for a major, sustained or influential achievement that meets one or more of the criteria listed below.

### Science

The advancement of our understanding of information retrieval methods, experimentation and evaluation, at either the theoretical or the practical level. The scope includes approaches as diverse as linguistic, probabilistic, fact-checking or artificial intelligence applied to search.

### Service Delivery

The development and management of systems, networks or services:

- Enhancement of the mechanisms/technology/standards underpinning information products or services
- Establishing an innovative information resource or service
- Innovations leading to improved accessibility/usability of information resources.

### Education and organisational infrastructure

The provision of leadership in education, training, community development and/or collaboration to advance information retrieval at local, national or international level.

### Submission guidelines

Nominations should take the form of a succinct justification (maximum 2 pages) for the individual or team nomination showing clearly which of the award criteria the nominee meets and how they are met. Please include full contact details, job title and qualifications of both the nominee and the nominator emailed to Richard Bridgen – Hon. Secretary UKeiG [secretary.ukeig@cilip.org.uk](mailto:secretary.ukeig@cilip.org.uk) and copied to: Gary Horrocks - [info.ukeig@cilip.org.uk](mailto:info.ukeig@cilip.org.uk) and Elizabeth Roberts – Hon. Treasurer UKeiG [treasurer.ukeig@cilip.org.uk](mailto:treasurer.ukeig@cilip.org.uk).

Please clarify in the email subject heading - 'UKeiG 2025 Strix award nomination'.

Self-nominations will not be accepted.

Please include testimonials, letters of support, references, a selective bibliography relevant to the nomination, or links to supplementary information including professional profiles or social media, for example.

Please email [info.ukeig@cilip.org.uk](mailto:info.ukeig@cilip.org.uk) for more information and guidance.

### Deadline

Nominations must reach the UKeiG by **6 pm GMT on Friday September 12th, 2025.**

### Further information

Further information about the Strix award is available [here](#), and includes [previous winners](#).

### Please share the news

The library and information science community is encouraged to raise awareness of these awards with individuals and groups in their networks and help encourage nomination submissions.

**The winner will be invited to present at an online awards ceremony in November 2025.**



*Gary Horrocks with Douglas Veal in November 2023*

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