The emerging phenomenon of knowledge management

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Knowledge management is a form of expertise-centred management which draws out tacit knowledge making it accessible for specific purposes to improve the performance of organisations. [It] is emerging as a key concern of organisations, particularly those which have already redesigned their business processes and embedded a total quality approach into their practices.

For the past four years, I have been involved in extensive research examining the information technology infrastructure capabilities of organisations. A significant part of that research is now focusing on the nature of the capabilities required to provide a sound basis for successfully managing knowledge processes, professionals and knowledge work.

I have multiple agendas in addressing readers on this topic: to provide a lens through which to view this emerging phenomenon; to stimulate thinking and discussion about the role of library and information service professionals and the role of libraries in the management of knowledge; to encourage library and information service directors to lead by example in managing the knowledge of their organisations, colleagues and staff; and to challenge readers to tell us how they are managing knowledge now.

Clarifying the notion of knowledge management

Knowledge is increasingly seen as a primary business asset and knowledge management as a key differentiator between firms in the late 1990s. Integral to the implementation of knowledge management is understanding the organisation's information flows and implementing organisational learning practices which make explicit key aspects of its knowledge base. Knowledge management is not about managing or organising books or journals, searching the Internet for clients or arranging for the circulation of materials. However, each of these activities can in some way be part of the knowledge management spectrum and processes.

Knowledge management is about enhancing the use of organisational knowledge through sound practices of information management and organisational learning. It involves two key components: utilising and exploiting of the organisation's information (which needs to be managed for this to occur); and second, the application of peoples' competencies, skills, talents, thoughts, ideas, intuitions, commitments, motivations and imaginations.

The fact that a sales person or reference librarian knows something about why products or services are not utilised the way the organisation desires is not of itself organisational knowledge. It becomes organisational knowledge when there are management processes in place which capture that often personal, tacit, front-line information from which others in the organisation learn and make decisions.

This represents a quantum shift for most organisations to a focus on using human expertise for business advantage.

First steps in managing knowledge

Four interdependent steps in getting started in knowledge management are described by Boynton:

- making knowledge visible;

- building knowledge intensity;

- developing a knowledge culture; and

- building knowledge infrastructure.

To what extent does your organisation already have one or more of the four steps in place? Libraries, as information-based services, should understand the importance of each of these steps and some are already taking the lead in their organisations with the encouragement of senior management. Others wait to be asked, which I suggest is no longer a sensible approach in either business or personal relationships!

Knowledge work, libraries and librarians

The basis of how organisations compete — their core competencies — increasingly centre around managing knowledge and knowledge workers. Where an organisation's performance is heavily reliant on knowledge work then knowledge management is pivotal.

But to what extent do librarians measure up as knowledge workers? Or is ours just information work?

Knowledge work is characterised by variety and exception rather than routine and is performed by professional or technical workers with a high level of skill and expertise.

Librarians who exercise their intellects in any of these types of activities are knowledge workers. If your work can be, or is, totally routinised, then you are an administrative worker, not a knowledge worker. If you describe what you do as organising things for others to access, you come close to being an administrative worker rather than a knowledge worker.

Librarians have excellent skills in organising and codifying information sources and making these accessible to others. This represents the top layer of the knowledge map — information — rather than tacit and explicit knowledge.

Knowledge management is not owned by any one group in an organisation, nor by any one profession or industry. But if you want to be a player in the emerging knowledge management phenomenon, you need to understand the multiple perspectives of the other players. ■

When the expanded version of this article was published in ALJ, Marianne asked for a candidate organisation to be part of a case study. Several readers contacted Marianne. They recognised the nature of their organisation's information politics and identified its impact on potential knowledge management initiatives as negative. To date, none have been suitable as a potential teaching case — that is, an 8–20 page exploration of an organisational situation where the organisation is willing to be named, air the positives and negatives, and where they are some 'lessons learnt'. Marianne is now working with a large firm developing a teaching case about how the firm has successfully commenced the implementation of knowledge management practices, but she remains willing to consider any library and information services who think they might be suitable.