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Knowledge management, librarians and information managers: fad or future?

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Feature article

Knowledge management, librarians and information managers: fad or future?

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Abstract

This paper reviews some recent professional and academic publications on aspects of the theory and practice of knowledge management, with particular reference to the curriculum of professional education for library and information management and the career roles and prospects of information professionals. Some commentators dismiss knowledge management as a fad; others view it as a major paradigm shift in the management and exploitation of "intellectual capital". It is concluded that many aspects of knowledge management practice bear a close resemblance to well-established practices in librarianship and information management. However, the emphasis by knowledge management theorists and practitioners on the importance of knowledge elicitation and knowledge creation, groupwork and team work, greater involvement in organisational strategy development and support and IT may require greater attention to the personality, motivation and career aspirations of potential entrants to the profession in order to prepare them better for wider-ranging, multi-role careers.

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Introduction

This article considers some of the principles and practices commonly associated with "knowledge management" (KM) in so far as they seem to be of potential importance or relevance to library and information professionals. Competing claims and counterclaims about KM as expressed in a selection of recent professional and academic publications are reviewed, though a truly comprehensive survey of the topic would, as Holtham (1997) suggests, have to take into account the domains of information systems strategies, information policies, computer science, knowledge-based and expert systems, the economics of information and knowledge, intellectual capital, human resource management and organisational culture and learning. While various definitions, or attempted definitions, of KM are quoted or referred to, the complex conceptual and epistemological aspects of, for example, the meanings of and relationships between data, information, knowledge, expertise, know-how and wisdom, which are often confused or ignored altogether in much of the literature of KM, are beyond the scope of this article (but see, for example, McGarry (1993) and Badenoch *et al.* (1994) for interesting discussions of these topics).

Although terms like "knowledge economy", "knowledge worker" and "knowledge management" have been in circulation for a considerable time, there appears still to be no real consensus of opinion about how, and to what extent, KM differs clearly from and/or represents an advance or improvement on established librarianship or, more specifically, information management or information resources management theory and practice (see Drucker, 1967; 1969; Machlup, 1980; Sveiby and Lloyd, 1987). There are also differing views about both the validity of the conceptual foundation and framework so far developed for KM and the claims made for it as a major paradigm shift in the theory and practice of information resources management and its credibility as an approach to the management of human and intellectual resources in organisations. Some commentators have been inclined to dismiss KM as yet

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another, transient management fad (for example, Holtham, 1997), while others have recognised in it at least a partial reincarnation or resurrection of familiar library and information management processes and procedures (for example, Koenig, 1996; Broadbent, 1998). It has also been seen as both a threat to and challenge and/or opportunity for new career paths for information professionals (for example, Rossion, 1998; Hill, 1998).

In spite of, or perhaps because of, these conflicting views, there has been an explosion of publications, Internet resources, conferences, workshops and seminars about KM; a recent monograph on KM, for example, records that a search for relevant Websites conducted while the book was being written produced as many as 137,038 sites apparently relevant to the topic of KM (Webb, 1998, p. 4). Terms and titles such as “knowledge culture”, “knowledge-creating company”, “knowledge-based assets”, “chief knowledge officer”, “knowledge architect”, “knowledge director”, “knowledge manager”, “knowledge specialist”, “knowledge assets” and “intellectual capital”, now appear regularly in job specifications and advertisements. Much of this activity, as noted above, has been concerned primarily with the development of a KM approach to organisational or corporate information strategy and policy, and concepts such as the “learning” or “knowledge” company and the management of “intellectual capital” (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Brooking, 1996; Lester, 1996; von Krogh and Roos, 1996; Wilson, 1996; Chudasama, 1997; Davenport and Prusak, 1997; David Skyrme Associates, 1997; Skyrme, 1997; Skyrme and Amindon, 1997; Sveiby, 1997; Stewart, 1997; Bonaventura, 1997; Knowledge Management, 1998b; Skyrme, 1998; Murray and Myers, 1999). There is also evidence of a growing interest in the public sector, including health information services and several police forces (West Mercia, Surrey) in the UK, and the Scottish Museums Council, for example, has recently awarded a contract to Solon Consultants to review the management of knowledge at the Council and formulate a strategy for knowledge management at the Council’s Information Centre (Knowledge Management, 1998a; 1998d; Solon Consultants, 1999).

As for academic and research libraries, some university libraries in the USA are now

promoting themselves as “knowledge centres”. In the UK, interest has, however, been more muted[1]; as Collier (1994, p. 216) says, in a different context, “This is curious, given that a university is a knowledge-based organisation *par excellence*”. A recent study of the management information needs of academic heads of department in English universities found, for example, that the majority of university librarians interviewed could not see any role for the library in helping to meet the management, as opposed to the research and teaching, needs of academics (Greene *et al.*, 1996). However, the convergence of library and computer services and the requirement by funding bodies that institutions should formulate information policies and strategies have led to a higher profile for the role of information management in the institution as a whole and there is some evidence that both the funding councils and a small number of universities are beginning to investigate the link between information policies and KM (Collier, 1994, p. 216; Corral, 1998). Although Corral (1998), in an article based on a paper originally prepared for the Joint Information Systems Committee’s Committee on Electronic Information, notes that KM does not yet appear to have had much impact on the higher education sector, she nevertheless draws attention to research at the Universities of Leicester and Warwick, on behalf of the Institute of Personnel and Development, on human resource roles in KM initiatives, and a Know-How project at the Open University involving its Knowledge Media Institute, Institute for Educational Technology and the Library, and also mentions the involvement of the University of Leeds in a Knowledge Management Consortium formed by the Centre for Exploitation of Science and Technology along with a number of companies.

The number of publications more specifically concerned with KM and libraries and information services is growing steadily. The following are worth consulting: Abell (1999), McGarry (1993), Badenoch *et al.* (1994), Collier (1994), Koenig (1996), Greene *et al.* (1996), Peters (1996), Abram (1997), Broadbent (1997), Dwiart (1997), Klobas (1997), Koenig (1997), Marshall (1997), Miller (1997), Broadbent (1998), Butcher (1998), Cooper (1998), Corral (1998), Doyle and du Toit (1998), Field (1998), Fisher (1998), Harris (1998), Hill (1998), Infield

(1998), Lank (1998), Pedley (1998), Rossion (1998), St Clair (1998), Sturges (1998), Foster (1999), Field (1999), Kirk (1999) and Streatfield and Wilson (1999). Rather surprisingly, three recent publications about the challenges and opportunities facing information professionals, issues in their training and education, and the competencies for special library professionals, do not specifically refer to knowledge management (Pantry, 1997; Rehman, 1997; Burke and Miller, 1998). On the other hand, TFPL Ltd has recently carried out an investigation aimed at the identification of the key roles in KM and the skills and expertise necessary to fulfil them, as well as the assessment of the training and development needed to prepare personnel and to enhance information skills throughout organisations (Hill, 1998, p. 150); at the time of writing, this investigation has been completed and TFPL Ltd has announced a number of events to disseminate the results.

Knowledge and its management

Introducing a collection of papers on the theoretical aspects of research on knowledge in organisations, von Krogh and Roos (1996, p. 1) refer to the persistent ambiguity of the concept of knowledge and state that “There is much to be discovered in the field of knowledge management and we are still on the very first steps of what appears to be a long ladder”, while Rossion (1998, p. 157) describes KM as stumbling “... on lack of common understanding, agreed standards, and proven processes”. Murray and Myers (1999) describe KM as “a slippery concept” and continue:

In the last few years, management theorists and academics have burst blood vessels and budgets analysing what it means – and there are a host of definitions, even embryonic philosophies, circulating the executive hot-desks and boardrooms of the world (Murray and Myers, 1999).

While much of this ambiguity and uncertainty may well be due to the often loose and inconsistent definition and use of the terms “knowledge” and “information”, there is a much more fundamental misunderstanding apparent, or, at least, implicit, in much that has been written about KM, namely, the misleading assumption that knowledge can actually be managed in the same way as the people who possess it. As Streatfield and Wilson (1999) put it, however:

We cannot manage knowledge directly – we can only manage information about the knowledge possessed by people in organisations. Even then, the information to be managed is necessarily incomplete because the boundaries of personal knowledge are fuzzy and continually changing as individuals get out of touch or extend their knowledge (Streatfield and Wilson, 1999, p. 70).

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), a frequently cited text in the KM field, devote a whole chapter to a review of concepts of knowledge from Classical Greece to the middle of the twentieth century. They argue that there has been a tendency in the Western epistemological tradition to prefer “abstract theories and hypotheses” and “precise, conceptual knowledge and systematic sciences”, whereas Japanese epistemology has tended “to value the embodiment of direct, personal experience” and that this is apparent in Japanese management’s emphasis on “on the spot” experience and networking and the importance of tacit or implicit as opposed to explicit knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, pp. 30–31). (Tacit or implicit knowledge is personal, unarticulated, unrecorded and difficult, some would argue impossible, to elicit and manage, while explicit knowledge is formal, systematic, and comparatively easy to communicate and share.) Although generally regarded as a seminal work, Nonaka and Takeuchi’s study of Japanese car companies as “knowledge-creating” companies has been accused of not recognising clearly enough the possibility that “... knowledge is so constrained by culture, style, education, expertise etc.” that “... there must be grave doubts that it is possible or desirable for Western companies to copy Japanese approaches to knowledge management ...” (Holtham, 1997, p. 79). Badenoch *et al.* (1994, pp. 10–12) also stress that we must “... recognise the subjectivity of any approach to understanding information, and its dependency on linguistic, cultural, social and technological influences”. Their summary of a number of definitions of “information” and “knowledge” illustrates the complexity of the relationship between the two, e.g. information is the link between knowledge and observed phenomena; information supplies and supports knowledge; information is an expression of knowledge; information is “useful knowledge”, and, quoting Stonier (1990, p. 17), “Knowledge is organised information in people’s heads” (Badenoch *et al.*, 1994, p. 11). They make the

distinction between ontogenic and exogenic knowledge, that is, between "... the use of the term 'knowledge' to describe an internal mental state and an external representation or embodiment of knowledge" and suggest that knowledge is "... personal, individual and inaccessible", but that it does, however, "... manifest itself in (and is created and modified by) information" (Badenoch *et al.*, 1994, p. 13). They also emphasise the continuous and dynamic nature of knowledge, since it:

... changes in the course of acquiring information ... information affects our state of knowledge regarding something (possibly providing justification for a belief) ... It should be emphasised that this state of knowledge is continuous and dynamic, i.e. existed before the information arrived, and may change rapidly. Thus, knowledge is more than "the sum of its parts", and we cannot seriously consider knowledge to be composed of "units" of information (Badenoch *et al.*, 1994, pp. 14–15).

Intellectual capital

Recently, there seems to have been a shift of emphasis from the concept of "knowledge management" to the management of "intellectual capital" or "intellectual assets":

To be aware that knowledge can be tacit, explicit or anything else doesn't take us very far in trying to understand just why knowledge is now considered essential to economic well-being and how an organisation can managed [*sic*] it for competitive advantage and indeed survival. It is more useful to consider "knowledge" in terms of intellectual capital (Knowledge Management, 1998c, p. 11).

In this context "intellectual capital" is used to mean not only information, in the sense or senses in which it has traditionally or conventionally been understood and managed by information professionals, but also such "intangibles" as the expertise, knowhow, experience, competencies, talents, ideas, thought and intuitions of the people in an organisation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Koenig, 1996; David Skyrme Associates, 1997; Skyrme, 1997; Welch, 1997; Chudasama, 1997; Stewart, 1997; Boisot, 1998; Broadbent, 1998; Sparrow, 1998). These "intangible" assets have been described as encompassing: market assets, such as brands, licensing and franchising agreements; infrastructure assets, such as technologies, corporate culture, databases of information on markets and customers; intellectual property rights, such as copyrights, patents, registered designs, trade marks; and

human-centred assets, such as the talents, skills, expertise, creativity, and problem-solving abilities of employees (Brooking, 1996; Knowledge Management, 1998c).

Knowledge management, information management and librarianship

KM has been broadly defined as "... the acquisition, sharing and use of knowledge within organisations, including learning processes and management information systems" (University of Warwick, 1999) or, more specifically, "... the explicit and systematic management of vital knowledge and its associated processes of creating, gathering, organising, diffusion, use and exploitation. It requires turning personal knowledge into corporate knowledge that can be widely shared throughout an organisation and appropriately applied" (David Skyrme Associates, 1997). Murray and Myers (1999), summarising the findings of a survey of European business leaders' views on KM, undertaken by the Cranfield School of Management, report that 73 per cent of those surveyed favoured the definition of KM as "... the collection of processes that govern the creation, dissemination, and utilisation of knowledge to fulfil organisational objectives". Some of those who have tried to define KM in relation to librarianship, information management and/or information resources management concede that there is much about KM that may arouse a sense of *déjà-vu* among many information professionals:

We would of course recognise "knowledge management" as librarianship, or at least as an extension of librarianship – but unfortunately the business community does not yet recognise that essential identity (Koenig, 1996, p. 299).

Of the six steps which Koenig lists as essential in order to enable an organisation to capitalise on the "intellectual capital" at its disposal, three – the role of information, knowledge, skills and expertise, and customers' needs in one's own organisation, assessment of competitors' "knowledge assets", and evaluation of one's own organisation's "knowledge portfolio and assets" – match, in his view, information-mapping concepts already familiar to librarians and information managers:

Some of us in the library community will be having a slight feeling of *déjà-vu* – Yes, this is precisely the concept of "information mapping" that Horton and others in the library community have been promoting for years ... We may feel, with some justification, that

knowledge management is just a new name for librarianship ... (Koenig, 1996, p. 299).

However, he suggests that this view is likely to reinforce the stereotype of the librarian as “too focused” and unable to see the larger picture, though he also sees librarianship as bringing to KM:

... a set of tools ... to facilitate the implementation of knowledge management, the extension of librarianship, thus avoiding unnecessary, wasteful, expensive, and, above all, time-consuming reinventions of the skills and tools we already have (Koenig, 1996, p. 300).

For Broadbent (1998, p. 26), the foundations of KM are the use and exploitation of an organisation’s information through the application of the workforce’s “skills, talents, thoughts, ideas, intuitions, commitments, motivations, and imaginations [*sic*]” although she too admits to a sense of *déjà-vu*. However, KM is not, in her view, about managing or circulating printed materials or Internet searching on behalf of clients (although these activities may form part of the KM processes), and “... it goes beyond data capture and manipulation in order to obtain information”. Rather, KM has to do with the use of:

... professional intellect in activities which use individual and external knowledge to produce outputs characterised by information content ... the acquisition, creating, packaging or application and reuse of knowledge (Broadbent, 1998, pp. 24–5).

She distinguishes between, on the one hand, “Librarians who are intellectually involved in any of these types of activities ...” whom she calls “knowledge workers”, and, on the other, the person involved in “... organising things for others to access ...” whom she describes as coming close to “... being an administrative worker rather than a knowledge worker” (Broadbent, 1998, p. 32). Rossion also warmly welcomes KM initiatives since they seem to require the established skills of information management:

Here is a discipline which highlights our skills, which admits that our job is valuable for the firm’s business strategy, which offers us the potential for new development fields and which is strongly supported by top management (Rossion, 1998, p. 157).

Is knowledge management a fad?

Discussing the life cycle of management fads, Holtham (1997, pp. 79ff) adopts a sceptical

attitude towards what he calls “business knowledge management”, noting that another management fad, “business process re-engineering” (BPR), has “... in a short number of years ... gone from boom to bust in business management circles. What was once the centre of attention has in BPR become the almost undiscussable”. He further notes that the treatment of KM as a fad:

... has been a matter of great concern to information professionals who have studied and practised in this area for almost all their working life. Its bandwagon represented the apparent victory of the uninformed in pursuit of the unachievable, and to information professionals it could probably only all end in tears (Holtham, 1997, p. 80).

Although predicting that as a fad or panacea KM “... is doomed to burn out before 2000–2001” he concludes that “... the underlying domain of knowledge management will continue to be of great, even if largely still unrecognised, importance” if or when it is viewed in the context of wider related issues such as culture, skills and technology (Holtham, 1997, p. 84). On the other hand, however, a 1998 survey of 100 leading companies in the UK found that, compared with a similar survey the previous year, the proportion of those who thought KM was a fad declined from nearly 33 per cent to 2 per cent, and that nearly 85 per cent of respondents claimed to be already implementing what they considered to be KM initiatives or were preparing to do so (Knowledge Management, 1998c, p. 14). Nevertheless, the Cranfield survey referred to above (Murray and Myers, 1999) concluded that while KM is being practised in Europe it has not yet reached the agenda at board level in most companies.

Streatfield and Wilson (1999, p. 67) suggest that KM may not be a fad if it is viewed as an attempt to “... make sense of managing information as a strategic resource or asset on a par with managing people, materials, resources or money” but could be considered a fad in so far as an “... over-simplistic use of the concept of knowledge ...” has encouraged IT developers and vendors and management consultants to make exaggerated claims about the ability of the available or next generation of computers to capture, manipulate and manage “knowledge”. Nevertheless, since the central role in knowledge creation can only be assumed by human beings they acknowledge that:

... the knowledge management metaphor remains an enticing one, whether the intention is to promote the sale of IT systems, advance the position of information workers to the status of knowledge workers, create a new market arena for specialist business consultants by coupling the concept with the notion of competitive advantage, or from a very different perspective, to provide more effective means of “managing intellectual capital” and creating knowledge through social interaction ... (Streatfield and Wilson, 1999, p. 68).

They propose “knowledge awareness management” as an alternative path, the essential point of this being that:

... *all* [original italics] key staff should be treated as information managers, even if one of them assumes overall responsibility for the strategy. This does not disqualify the information professional from taking a key role in the organisational attempt at developing knowledge awareness strategies; nor does it assume any pre-defined role as proper for the information professional (Streatfield and Wilson, 1999, p. 69).

Consequently, they do not foresee any substantive change in the basic role of information professionals in any organisation which takes the “knowledge awareness management” perspective, that is, to “... acquire and organise information, make it available for use, disseminate it and, ultimately dispose of information resources in all media”, although they will be required to adopt a more systematic approach to “... tracking existing organisational information strengths” and “... developing new information resources relating to the available in-house expertise” (Streatfield and Wilson, 1999, p. 69). For her part, Rossion suggests “knowledge sharing” as an alternative to “knowledge management” since the latter term is unfortunate because:

... it gives the impression that its ultimate purpose is to exert greater control over people’s minds. The expression “knowledge sharing” would probably be more appropriate since it stresses the reciprocity of the knowledge process: if you share your knowledge, you can expect some return, immediately or in the future (Rossion, 1998, p. 157).

Knowledge management in practice: skills and competencies

Hill (1998, p. 149), comparing the range of skills frequently claimed as necessary for effective KM with those considered necessary in librarianship and information management, argues that “... the recognition of the

importance and value of internal information and the need for harmonisation and organisation of corporate capital/information/memory/knowledge – call it what you will” at senior or board level within organisations means that “There most certainly is a career path in information management [*sic*] for the information professional should he or she wish to take that route”:

The apparent quiet of the librarian hides the mighty roar of skills and ability harnessed through study and practice ... The term [knowledge management] is likely to be transient if not faddish, and any rush to incorporate it in long-term documents or courses for the future might indeed be construed as short termism. The skills will never go out of fashion but the name might (Hill, 1998, p. 149).

Having examined recruitment literature for KM posts Hill concludes that despite the unfamiliar vocabulary of the job specifications and descriptions of the knowledge, skills and abilities sought by employers:

... it will become clear that an information professional will possess not just the tangible skills required (i.e. research, quick reference skills, source knowledge, collection development, Netscape, online, IT) but also the intangible ones (communication, customer services orientation, organisational understanding, business knowledge, interpersonal skills) (Hill, 1998, p. 151).

Similar conclusions might be drawn from some of the recent case studies of KM in practice (Cooper, 1998; Knowledge Management, 1998a; 1998b; Lank, 1998). For example, the PricewaterhouseCoopers Information and Knowledge Exchange (IKE) described by Cooper (1998) features a number of so-called knowledge hubs (staffed full-time by knowledge hub managers and knowledge hub assistants), each focused on a key area of organisational knowledge and/or activities such as corporate strategy development and financial systems, key commercial sectors in the company’s consultancy activities, and major client account teams. As well as maintaining the contents of the IKE libraries these hubs support users of the IKE, undertake research and promote what is described as “knowledge-sharing evangelism”. The knowledge specialists who staff the hubs are either qualified “information scientists” (formerly referred to as researchers) who previously worked primarily with external information resources, or former senior secretarial staff with extensive knowledge and

experience of the consultancy's activities, human resources and organisational culture. Cooper reports, however, that some of the former researchers were hesitant about involvement in the management of internal information, partly because in their professional education and previous experience they had concentrated on external sources of information, and partly because involvement in the management of internal information was perceived to offer little of value in terms of their own career development (Cooper, 1998, p. 48). Cooper's list of what he considers to be the key abilities, competencies and talents required for such posts resemble to a great extent those mentioned by Hill (1998) and Rossion (1998), namely: the ability to work and empathise with others both inside and outside the organisation; well-developed interpersonal and communication skills; IT skills; the ability to prioritise, structure and organise activities effectively; awareness of organisational structures, processes, markets and strategy; knowledge and understanding of user needs and of information and technical resources; research and analysis skills; and the ability and willingness to act as "evangelists" in positive promotion of the "knowledge-sharing culture" at all levels of the organisation (Cooper, 1998, p. 50).

Most of these skills and competencies may seem familiar to practising librarians and information managers, and many of them are already addressed in the curriculum of professional education for librarianship and information management, though Hill quotes a lecturer in the latter as saying:

... a course in KM ... might need to be a judicious mix of subject matter drawn from information science, information systems, industrial sociology and psychology ... we have not yet gathered the strength to surmount the conceptual barriers which one encounters between these disciplines, in order to promote a new named degree in KM. We stand on the kerbside of the knowledge highway, waiting to judge the passing speed of this particular bandwagon (Hill, 1998, p. 154).

One recurring theme of much of the KM-related literature referred to in this paper is that library and information services can no longer afford to be situated or operated as discrete or autonomous or semi-autonomous units simply "servicing" the rest of their organisation but must increasingly participate in and contribute to the wider decision-making and strategy-formulation activities of their organisations. The role of information

professionals and others involved in the processes of information/knowledge "brokering" or "leveraging" is likely, therefore, to become much more complex. Other notable themes include the need to encourage and develop the "sharing" of information in organisations, to emphasise the value of teamwork, groupwork and intranets, and activities related to the elicitation and creation of "knowledge" within organisations. However, as Corral (1998) points out, "... librarians' traditional reluctance to move beyond the information container towards analysis and interpretation of its contents has resulted in organisations overlooking their potential contribution, even in areas where their competence should be obvious. Information professionals are seen as service-oriented, but not value-oriented – they don't understand the impact they can have on the business". It is not only a matter of "knowledge management" but of human resource management.

The best of current professional education would appear, on the face of it, to be already imparting or developing many of the skills and competencies called for in KM, although how they are taught or nurtured, or how students are enabled to learn and practise them may require more attention, and more attention may also have to be paid to the personality, motivation and career aspirations of the students recruited. Although KM, as noted above, may have a limited lifespan as a management fad and may be seriously flawed conceptually, it would appear at least to have contributed to a growing recognition at senior management level in a very wide range of types of organisation of the crucial importance of "information" or "knowledge" to the success and well-being of organisations, and has, therefore, led to a higher profile for information professionals and their skills and competencies. Whether this higher profile will in turn lead to much greater integration of those professionals into the senior and strategic management structures of organisations remains to be seen.

Note

- 1 A student on the MA in Librarianship programme at the Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield is currently undertaking a study of knowledge management and academic libraries as a dissertation project.

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