



The Knowledge Management Myth: Will the Real Knowledge Managers Please Step Forward?

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Abstract

The library literature of the past few years has periodically exhorted librarians to market themselves as knowledge workers capable of taking over the emerging 'knowledge management' function in their organisations. This paper challenges such a fanciful re-engineering of the librarian's role and suggests that it is based on the misguided conflation of knowledge management and information management. It argues that the two are much more distinct than generally believed, and contrasts them by attempting to identify the tasks of a knowledge manager, outlining appropriate 'position descriptions' for the Knowledge Management field and examining the professional background and organisational position required to fulfill these roles.

Introduction

Despite the theoretical problems associated with Knowledge Management – problems that have provided no small amount of material for conferences and the publishing industry – Knowledge Management has survived for over ten years and continues to attract considerable attention in conferences, on websites and in the literature – not just the literature of library and information management, but also the literature of business management. Knowledge Management workshops and consultancies also attract substantial fees, which might be regarded by some as evidence of its value. Moreover there continue to be numerous calls in the literature of library and information management for information professionals to stake their claim as their organisations' best-qualified knowledge managers. We are ideally placed to take on this role, the argument goes, because we have been managing knowledge from time immemorial (Butler 2000, p.40; Corral 1999; Townley 2001, p.53). Patricia Milne's otherwise excellent paper (2000, p.149;) refers to librarians as the 'ultimate knowledge workers', while, in the academic library sector, Joseph Branin (2003, p.11) claims to have been asked by senior university administrators: 'If we had the experience and expertise to manage published information, could we not extend this expertise to all the intellectual assets of the University?' At this conference four years ago, Christine Johnston (2000) made the bold claim that librarians were 'in a position of strength' and that our 'traditional skills ... place us in an ideal position to play a key role in an organisation's knowledge initiatives'. The recent IFLA collection, *Knowledge Management: Libraries and Librarians Taking up the Challenge*, is littered with such comments, some of them verging on the fanciful: for instance, Michael Koenig's suggestion that the 'obvious' solution to the failure of so many knowledge management systems to match up to companies' expectations is to import librarians to provide user education and training (2004, 140). Hans-Christoph Hobohm (2004, p.7) begins

the collection with the claim that knowledge management is one of those concepts that librarians take time to assimilate, only to reflect ultimately 'on why other communities try to colonise our domains' – well, the title of the collection does refer to challenge.

Not all writers, in fairness, claim the Knowledge Management domain as ours. Milne's paper, for instance, refers to library and information professionals forging partnerships with others in the 'domain', as distinct from 'colonisation', while, in a challenging paper in last year's *Australian Library Journal*, Cathie Koina questions whether librarians are really 'the ultimate knowledge managers' and points out that what librarians have done for many years is Information Management, which, contrary to what many librarians believe, is not the same as Knowledge Management (2003, p.270). In this paper I take a similar line. The claim that library and information professionals are ideally suited to stake their claim as knowledge managers flies in the face of much of the Knowledge Management literature, which is at pains to distinguish Knowledge Management from Information Management. While not necessarily agreeing with the notion that Knowledge Management and Information Management are completely distinct, I can see significant differences in the emphasis of each – differences that make the hyperbolic claims about Knowledge Management being 'souped-up' Librarianship highly questionable. That there are significant differences between the two is borne out, to a certain extent, by the number of Knowledge Management courses that have emerged in the past few years (Chaudhry & Higgins 2004).

My strategy in this paper is to attempt to establish the kinds of tasks performed by a knowledge manager – if there is such a thing – infer what a position description for a knowledge manager might look like and then ask whether our profession has the necessary skills and attributes. This seems to me a more productive approach than becoming bogged down, as many papers do, in an attempt to define Knowledge Management and

Information Management and then juxtaposing the two in one of the 'compare and contrast' exercises that educators love to throw at their long-suffering students.

Corporate knowledge

First, however, I would like to pose the question: which is the odd one out of the following terms:

- information management
- knowledge management
- library science
- military intelligence?

The clue lies in the last term, because it is often used as an example of oxymoron. Only one of the terms, Information Management, is not an oxymoron and is therefore the odd one out – librarianship is not a science and knowledge cannot be managed.

Having succeeded in antagonising everyone in the room, I would like to emphasise that, while for many of us it is a philosophical nonsense to suggest that knowledge can be managed, the proponents of Knowledge Management insist that what they are attempting to 'manage' for the sake of corporate benefit is the complete knowledge resource – not just the so-called explicit knowledge used by an organisation, such as policy documents, the contents of databases or corporate records (in other words, what we would call information), but also the knowledge locked away in people's heads, a significant portion of which is what we call 'know-how'. In a much quoted study, Thomas Davenport and Laurence Prusak (2000, p.5) describe organisational management as 'a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight' that is typically 'embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organisational routines, processes, practices, and norms.' It is the emphasis on this second type of knowledge – what the rest of us, by and large, understand as knowledge (rather than information) – that distinguishes Knowledge Management from Information Management. On a more pragmatic level, if someone is asked whether her organisation has any Knowledge Management problems, the chances are that the first example that springs to mind is the issue of people leaving the organisation with heaps of 'know-how' that is thus lost to the organisation.

There is little point, especially in a paper this length, of becoming sidetracked by the semantic debate that accompanies much of our discourse about Knowledge Management, although a degree of semantic argument is inevitable, given the subject and its definitional problems. There have been numerous attempts to provide a theoretical basis for Knowledge Management: for instance Davenport & Prusak (2000), Srikanntaiah & Koenig (2000) and Mac Morrow (2001), not to mention studies of organisational knowledge: most notably, Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995). It is worth noting that a 2002 review by Hlupik et al, identified eighteen distinct definitions of Knowledge Management (Bouthillier & Shearer 2002). Tom Wilson, a vocal critic of Knowledge Management, which he sees as typically repackaged Information Management, takes Nonaka and Takeuchi to task for what he sees as their misuse of Michael Polanyi's term, 'tacit knowledge'. That term, he suggests, refers to hidden processes of comprehension that cannot be expressed and that therefore cannot be 'managed' by the zealous Knowledge Manager (Wilson 2002). One can always change the term, however, and some writers have done so, substituting 'implicit knowledge', which has

the merit of sounding like the antonym of explicit knowledge. In fact, Ikujiro Nonaka, in a paper co-authored with Noburu Konno, refers to technical and cognitive dimensions to what he calls tacit knowledge. The cognitive dimension constitutes aspects such as 'schemata and mental models', which, the authors admit, are 'deeply ingrained in us' and 'difficult to articulate'. The technical, on the other hand, 'encompasses the kind of informal personal skills or crafts often referred to as 'know-how' (1998, p.42), and is much easier to articulate and therefore convert to explicit knowledge or, what we call, information.

Many of the proponents of Knowledge Management use the term for want of a better one – and because it is still a term that sells consultancies – but actually talk about the development of strategies and processes to encourage the sharing of knowledge or, more typically, the *leverage* of knowledge – the creation of an organisational culture and the development of a technological infrastructure that encourage the sharing of knowledge and foster the development of a learning organisation. It is frequently claimed that Knowledge Management is wider than Information Management, and even subsumes it. In her well-known paper in *Australian Library Journal*, Marianne Broadbent, who has been one of the most influential proponents of Knowledge Management in the Australian library and information sector, suggests (1997, pp.8-9) that, 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, she insists, 'is about enhancing the use of organisational knowledge through sound practices of information management and organisational learning.'

Part of the occasionally inflated claim for Knowledge Management is that it is an integrated approach to leveraging an organisation's intellectual capital. 'Leveraging' suggests to me the bizarre image of the Knowledge Manager sawing open the poor employee's head and leveraging out bits of brain, all for the corporate good. We are assured, however, that 'leveraging' knowledge refers to establishing the value of knowledge at each stage of knowledge creation and transfer, and ensuring that the full value is realised. And of course it is an integrated approach. It is basically a management paradigm and as such can be expected to take an integrated approach. No management consultant worth his or her salt is going to say: 'We can tell you how to leverage some of your intellectual capital – if you want the other stuff, find another consultant.'

The corporate knowledge that knowledge managers are meant to be leveraging includes the following categories, according to Karl Wiig (1993, p.156), one of the most influential and most often cited writers on Knowledge Management in the business sector:

- Tacit Knowledge, such as the kind found in skills and habits or in non-associative learning;
- Explicit Knowledge, which might be held in a person's mind (for instance, procedural knowledge) or in written materials (for example, production knowledge)
- Implicit Knowledge, which might be held in historic records of past decisions or in R&D reports
- Combined Explicit and Implicit Knowledge: for instance, 'lessons-learned' reports
- Procedural Knowledge, typically present in computer programs
- Anecdotal Knowledge, such as memory of a particular 'case' in someone's mind; and

- Embedded Knowledge, in other words, knowledge embedded in organisational structures, systems and procedures, and in technology.

One might disagree with parts of Wiig's taxonomy, such as the notion that explicit knowledge can be held in a person's mind, but it demonstrates the scope of corporate knowledge that Knowledge Management is intended to address. It is much broader than the explicit knowledge handled by our profession, which consists largely of published information.

David Skyrme, another much quoted commentator on Knowledge Management, suggests (1999) that most KM programs focus on the following seven 'strategic levers':

- Customer Knowledge – the most vital knowledge in most organizations
- Knowledge in Processes – applying the best know-how while performing core tasks
- Knowledge in Products (and Services) – smarter solutions, customized to users' needs
- Knowledge in People – nurturing and harnessing brainpower, your most precious asset
- Organizational Memory – drawing on lessons from the past or elsewhere in the organization
- Knowledge in Relationships – deep personal knowledge that underpins successful collaboration
- Knowledge Assets – measuring and managing your intellectual capital.

Tasks of the knowledge manager

Turning to the 'tasks' that might be the responsibility of a knowledge manager, France Bouthillier and Kathleen Shearer (2002) conducted an empirical study of twelve organisations – six from the private and six from the public sectors – which identifies what they called Knowledge Management 'methodologies', which they categorised as follows:

- focus on communication, namely, Communities of Practice and Question and Answer forums
- focus on storage and retrieval, namely, Knowledge Mapping, Expert Databases and Knowledge Databases
- focus on selected dissemination, namely, News Information Alerts and Organisational Learning
- focus on action, namely, virtual collaboration.

This is by no means a comprehensive or rigorous typology but, again, it demonstrates the range of the Knowledge Management domain. It also highlights both the overlap between Knowledge Management and Information Management, and the distance between the two in terms of focus.

Compare these 'methodologies' with the tasks of an information manager, as outlined in a well-known book published by the British Government (Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency 1990, p.15) over a decade ago:

- What are the organisation's business aims and objectives?
- What information is needed to support those aims?
- What information is available in the organisation?
- Are there differences between needs and provision?
- What has to be done to match needs and provision?
- Is further exploitation of information viable?

Some of the methodologies employed to effect these Information Management tasks resemble those listed by Bouthillier and Shearer: for instance, one establishes the match, or absence of match, between information and needs by conducting an information audit, which in many essentials resembles 'knowledge mapping'. Once again, however, it is worth noting that the methodologies listed in the Knowledge Management study are overwhelmingly designed to provide and facilitate the sharing of so-called tacit or implicit knowledge.

Position descriptions

The sheer range of the Knowledge Management domain makes the construction of a hypothetical position description for a knowledge manager difficult, if not impossible. There is likely to be a whole range of positions, each responsible for a reasonably well-defined area in the domain of corporate knowledge and its creation, codification and storage (where feasible), exchange and exploitation. A couple of years ago, Standards Australia published some 'sample job descriptions', compiled by Karen Bishop. Based on her expertise as a recruitment consultant, these are constructed around more specific sets of tasks than the 'methodologies' just listed. Positions covered include: 'Competitive Intelligence Leader', 'Knowledge and Information Manager', 'Information Literacy Manager', 'Intranet Content Manager' and 'Knowledge Coordinator'. Interestingly, two of these positions relate to what we do in the library and information profession. The specific 'knowledge-enabling' tasks performed by these knowledge managers include the following:

- knowledge strategies – to develop/improve the knowledge processes that support organisational development and performance;
- knowledge auditing – to develop maps of organisational knowledge, identify gaps in knowledge and barriers to knowledge discovery/exchange/development;
- 'information literacy' training programs for improved use of information and knowledge resources;
- facilitation skills for improved group dynamics, and coaching programs for improved communication skills to help with collaboration and innovation;
- designing systems and procedures to enable effective creation of, and access to, recorded knowledge; and
- managing changes in organisational behaviour in line with knowledge-focused organisational strategy (2002, p.12).

In areas such as information literacy and provision of access to recorded knowledge, library and information professionals clearly have some expertise, but the other tasks take them well outside the comfort zones populated by most of the profession – not that we shouldn't consider venturing out of these zones.

The IFLA collection, mentioned earlier, also demonstrates a wide range of Knowledge Management positions. In it, Anne Morris reports on another empirical study, this time in Britain, that collected, analysed and, where necessary, followed up on job advertisements in the Knowledge Management sector over the six-month period, October 2000 until March 2001. The information collected was used to categorise roles as follows:

- Chief Knowledge Officer – a senior person, responsible for the initial development of Knowledge Management strategy, leadership and coordination
- Chief Knowledge Team Manager – also a senior person,

responsible for 'KM development and training, strategy, IT infrastructure, business processes, change management and so on'

- Implementation Manager – part of a team responsible for 'KM implementation and monitoring and overseeing the development of processes, infrastructure and information resources'
- Knowledge Centre-Based Employee – with responsibility for 'facilitating acquisition, dissemination and access to internal and external information and knowledge sources'
- Knowledge Networker – with responsibility for 'facilitating KM activities within a specific network and community'
- Business Unit-Based Employee – with responsibility for 'facilitating the development and implementation of KM activities with the help of the implementation team in their unit' (2004, pp.118-9).

Some of the positions categorised here are senior ones that require considerable knowledge of the core business of the organisation and the authority on a strategic level to effect changes in areas such as IT infrastructure and organisational culture. At the other end of the spectrum are employees based in specific units who work in teams as knowledge 'facilitators' – many of these will be people who have the required business or subject expertise, but some may have an information and/or knowledge management background. Somewhere between the two extremes is a Knowledge Centre that requires knowledge and skills that look rather like those of an information professional.

Discussion

Two main points strike me about the kinds of positions associated with the Knowledge Management domain. The first, to which I have already alluded, is the sheer range.

This is hardly surprising, given the range of information professionals working under the somewhat more 'traditional' Information Management umbrella. While there are continuities of practice within the Information Management sector – represented by works such as the British Government one mentioned earlier – there are also many applications, ranging from the 'traditional' document-orientated professions, such as librarianship and records management (both quite separate professions with their own, typically distinct, position descriptions), to the 'hybrid' information managers who form a 'bridge' between those senior managers responsible for conducting an organisation's primary business and those people who design and implement the supporting systems and technologies. Of course there are important continuities of practice, such as information analysis, but there are also significant differences. Librarians and systems people may both talk about information analysis, but the processes and outcomes are quite distinct.

Position descriptions for the various information professions vary enormously, and it is not surprising that it is similar in the area of Knowledge Management, which is claimed to be wider than Information Management. In one of the more balanced papers in the IFLA collection, Liz Davenport (2004, p.82) quotes a previous paper she co-authored with Blaise Cronin in 2000, which is worth repeating here: 'knowledge management is a form of distributed cognition, a multifaceted domain where professionals of different provenance must recognize each other's roles.' In other words, it is not a question of 'them' trying to muscle in on our traditional 'territory' or of our attempting to colonise theirs.

The second point that I would like to highlight is the fact that in terms of information politics, it is unlikely that many librarians are in any position to bring about the level of knowledge leverage required if their organisations are to become learning organisations. The more senior 'knowledge-enabling' tasks outlined by writers such as Bishop and Morris require a level of leverage that very few librarians enjoy, although many may aspire to it. Some include a strategic information management role that includes development of an organisation's IT infrastructure, and we all know that in the Information Management domain – notwithstanding some notable exceptions in the tertiary education sector – our Information Systems and Technology colleagues tend to occupy a higher position in the corporate pecking order than most librarians. More important, is the level of organisational development required. Knowledge leverage needs to take place in parts of the organisation never reached by librarians.

It seems to me, therefore, that many of the knowledge-enabling tasks are best effected by the Human Resources division in an organisation. We are talking about significant evolutionary developments in organisational culture – if not, on occasion, revolutionary developments. Here is what David Snowden (1999) said a few years ago. Knowledge Management:

is a new way of thinking about the organisation and society. It challenges the dominant mechanical metaphor of scientific management, in thinking of the organisation as a complex, self-structuring ecology in which the secret is to achieve minimal intervention for maximum beneficial effect. It is about creating adaptive systems that learn, in preference to systems that are optimal within a specific context.

This, it seems to me, sums up the challenge involved in establishing learning organisations. While librarians have a role to play, Human Resources departments tend to be in a much stronger position to bring about the required cultural changes. It is worth noting here Michael Middleton's paper a few years ago, which described Knowledge Management (1999, p.2) as 'a combination of information management (IM) for managing the documentary form, and HRM for managing the expression of knowledge.'

The position description for the corporate Knowledge Manager, at the senior end of the spectrum, should look something like this:

Director, Knowledge Management

The Director, Knowledge Management, is accountable to the Executive Director, Human Resources, for promoting a culture of effective knowledge sharing and for planning and implementing organisational knowledge and information planning in alignment with the strategic plan of the organisation. This includes coordination of the delivery of an integrated organisation-wide program for staff development, communities of practice and provision of executive management development.

The Director is supported by a team of professional staff with specialist managers in knowledge centre management, records management, information systems and networks management, team leadership, and staff development and training.

The Director, as part of the senior human resources management team, will play an integral role in supporting the achievement of organisational objectives through:

- contributing to the strategic directions of the organisation by promoting an integrated Knowledge Management philosophy;
- linking knowledge and information management policies and

- practices with organisational objectives, including provision of information to support decision making;
- facilitating staff understanding of, and engagement with, the strategic direction of the organisation;
 - creating an innovative and adaptive culture for change by promoting an understanding of Knowledge Management among executives, managers, supervisors and staff;
 - assisting the organisation's executives and managers to incorporate knowledge management strategies at all levels of planning and performance management;
 - coordinating the delivery of an integrated professional development program in collaboration with other staff development providers;
 - identifying appropriate best practice primarily in the areas of knowledge and information management;
 - developing and managing all Knowledge Management projects, including planning, resourcing and communication strategies
 - assisting the human resources management team to review and evaluate knowledge management policies, procedures and systems to ensure they reflect best practice and continue to meet the organisation's strategic objectives; and
 - providing organisational development support for the implementation of knowledge management initiatives.

There may be much in this illustration of a Knowledge Manager to criticise, but it does suggest a plausible paradigm. When I read references in the literature to the need for librarians to stake, or even re-stake, their claim to be their organisation's Knowledge Manager, it strikes me that most librarians are still too close to the periphery of their organisation's core business to provide the kind of leadership required in the Knowledge Management environment.

This is not to belittle the success of those innovative librarians who have made some contribution to their organisations' knowledge leverage, especially, but not exclusively, in the areas of health and law. Some may recall, for instance, Grace Cheng's paper in the February 2000 issue of *Australian Library Journal* on the Hong Kong Hospital Authority, which outlined how librarians (no longer termed that of course) developed an electronic forum on which clinicians and managers discuss and exchange opinions on the application of evidence in local clinical practice, and supported the electronic publication of the Newsletter of best evidence (2000, pp. 22-23). Consider too a law firm, such as Allen Arthur Robinson, which has brought together knowledge managers and librarians to handle the large number of precedents required in legal practice. The knowledge managers in this case have legal qualifications and considerable subject expertise in the area of precedents, but the point is that the librarians bring their own information management expertise to the collaboration and, by working *with* the subject specialists, find themselves more closely aligned with areas of practice (C Thomas, C Machin & J Guerrato 2003, pers. comm. 9 Oct.). Information knowledge is not a substitute for subject knowledge or knowledge of business processes, but information professionals can on occasion work more closely with those who have that knowledge.

Conclusions

Librarians do belong in the Knowledge Management domain and have a contribution to make. Instead of making motherhood statements about what good knowledge managers we make, or

could make if we just had the chance, we should be exchanging success stories – case studies that will assist others to see what is possible. It is important, nonetheless, that we see ourselves as merely part of the so-called Knowledge Management solution and familiarise ourselves with the other players, and potential collaborators, whether they be other Information Management professionals or come from other backgrounds such as business or human resource management. It is also important that there is informed debate within the profession. There is a considerable literature within ALIA on professional roles for librarians, going back to the 1980s and including, most recently Sue Myburgh's paper in *ALJ* on educational directions (2003). For purposes of education, training and CPD, we need information on the changing job market at the interface of information and knowledge management; perhaps along the lines of the studies, mentioned earlier, by Bouthillier and Shearer and by Morris. If librarians are to make a grab for Knowledge Management, it needs to be a well-informed one.

Besides the issue of what library and information professionals have to contribute to the Knowledge Management domain, however, there is another reason for interesting ourselves in the subject. We are used to thinking of Knowledge Management in the special libraries sector, in which our more proactive colleagues have already repositioned themselves in their organisations as Information Managers – and *may* be in the course of staking their claims to the Knowledge Management turf – but it is worth remembering that other types of library often constitute substantial organisations in their own right: what the cataloguers in our midst call subordinate bodies. We should be asking whether the Knowledge Management principles that some see as integral to librarianship are actually practiced in our libraries. I would maintain – and I am very much open to contradiction – that there is no empirical evidence to suggest that library managers practice better Knowledge Management than any other type of manager. Indeed, I am sure we can all think of library managers whose ability to leverage the intellectual capital of their libraries leaves considerable 'room for improvement'.

Like many educators, I continue to attempt to impart some basic Knowledge Management principles to my students, not just to prepare them for the turf wars ahead, but also because an understanding of Knowledge Management and the need to create Learning Organisations should be an integral part of the wider HRM environment. However, I also continue to look, without much success, for evidence, first, of real engagement in the Knowledge Management domain by library and information professionals and, second, of an ability to practice what we preach in terms of 'leveraging' knowledge in our own libraries. I am sceptical, therefore when I ask an ALIA conference audience 'Will the Real Knowledge Managers Please Step Forward?' I don't expect to be flattened in the stampede, but I would be happy to be proved wrong.

Keywords

Knowledge management; Knowledge managers; Leveraging knowledge; Learning organisations; Corporate knowledge; Information management.

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