

**NEW TRICKS FOR OLD DOGS?
IS THERE A ROLE FOR LIBRARIANS IN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT?**

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ABSTRACT: Knowledge Management is a concept that the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) is only just starting to grapple with. Over the past few years GBRMPA Library staff have become heavily involved with raising awareness and attempting to get knowledge management projects under way. The authors look at the successes and failures to date, and ask the question: Is this an extension of our existing skills and strengths or are we old dogs trying to learn new tricks?

Introduction

Is knowledge management a new subject area for librarians? Are we venturing into unknown waters? Or does knowledge management offer an opportunity for librarians to apply their existing set of information management skills to another slightly broader discipline? Does it also present us with a challenge of learning some new skills? Why should we bother?

Defining Knowledge Management

There is an absolute plethora of definitions for knowledge management (Abell and Oxbrow 2001; Broadbent 1998; Koenig 1996; Butler 1999; Koina 2002). It appears to be a rather slippery concept. Someone said trying to define knowledge management was like trying to bottle fog. But librarians are on the whole sensible and pragmatic people – I think we're pretty good at cutting through the jargon and finding the essence of the issue. Standard Australia's (2003) definition was developed last year when Standards Australia developed an Interim Australian Standard for knowledge management:

a multi-disciplined approach to achieving organisational objectives by making best use of knowledge. It involves the design, review and implementation of both social and technological processes to improve the application of knowledge, in the collective interest of stakeholders.

Considering the nature of the subject (i.e., the fogginess of it), Standards Australia developed the document as a prescriptive rather than a normative standard.

Considering its fogginess and the jargon often associated with it, maybe it is better to explain some things knowledge management is not.

- It is not the latest fad
- It does not rely only on technology to improve processes. It recognises that knowledge rests with people and that technology is an enabler
- It is not a new religion or spiritual calling – there are many ‘evangelists’ who treat knowledge management as a new religion, full of ideology and theory. Real knowledge management is practical and action-orientated. It may take a change of mindset or attitude, but it doesn’t need a spiritual conversion. It also should not be an attempt to rally disgruntled employees around a new concept that they can’t understand
- It is not new – it just never had a label before

Some of those who have tried to define knowledge management in relation to librarianship or information management concede that there is much about knowledge management that may arouse a sense of *deja-vu* among librarians. Koenig (1996) suggests that librarians recognise knowledge management as librarianship. In other words knowledge management is just another word for librarianship, but the business and the corporate management community do not yet recognise that connection. This approach, however, may reinforce the stereotype of the overly focused librarian. It may be more productive to suggest that librarianship brings a set of relevant tools to knowledge management, which will facilitate successful implementation, and avoid wasteful, expensive, and time-consuming re-inventions of skills and tools already within an organisation.

Professional Skills Required in Knowledge Management Tasks

Butler (1999) states that the following skills are necessary when undertaking knowledge management tasks or projects. I think librarians have great strengths in these areas. We are really good at achieving the following:

- Organisational knowledge
- Communication skills
- Networking
- Assessment/evaluation of information
- Indexing, classification and cataloguing
- Researching
- Training
- Client service focus

Koina (2002) says that the following skills are also important in knowledge management projects.

- Lateral thinking
- Power to persuade, to sell ourselves
- Advocacy
- Marketing strategy
- Capacity to manage change, not just endure it
- Risk taking
- Leadership ability

Are these skills common amongst librarians? I know librarians that definitely do have these skills, but I also suggest these are areas that are often outside our comfort zones. Senior management often doesn't see us as critical players in knowledge management, so maybe we need to work more broadly within our agencies and start working more closely with areas such as IT, HR and senior management. Maybe we need to promote ourselves a bit more with these groups, who often don't use our standard services and consequently aren't our loyal and dedicated supporters.

Librarian's Role in a Knowledge Management Environment

When working in a knowledge environment, the information professional can have three primary roles and responsibilities:

- To provide both external and internal information products and services that consistently match the needs of an organisation
- To educate information users to ensure they can access and use the information products and services effectively – hopefully this then maximizes the quality and consistency of organisational knowledge
- To facilitate the sharing and transfer of knowledge

Elements of Knowledge Process	Task Descriptions	Relevant Librarian Skills
Knowledge Identification/Discovery	Identifies what knowledge is essential to an organization, and what knowledge gaps occur	Needs assessment Information audit Knowledge audit
Knowledge Creation/Acquisition	Determines sources of valuable knowledge within an organization, and defines what is required from external sources	Select, acquire evaluate external/internal info
Knowledge Capture/Storage/Codification/Retrieval	Supports capture, storage, and codification (ie indexing or cataloguing) of knowledge for effective retrieval	Cataloguing, indexing, metadata, thesauri, training
Knowledge Sharing/Transfer/Flow	Develops a knowledge/information sharing culture within an organization. This allows efficient knowledge transfer to where it is needed	Map information / knowledge Facilitate communities of practice

Table 1. Application of librarians' skills to the main knowledge processes (Henczel 2004).

Knowledge management processes often get divided into four main elements (Table 1). Each of the four primary knowledge management processes is underpinned or supported by tasks or activities which require skills and knowledge that information professionals or librarians possess.

Case Study: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

Knowledge management is a concept that the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) is only just starting to grapple with. The following short case study describes the birth and development of the concept of knowledge management at GBRMPA, and the important role that the library staff have played in driving this 'new' style of working.

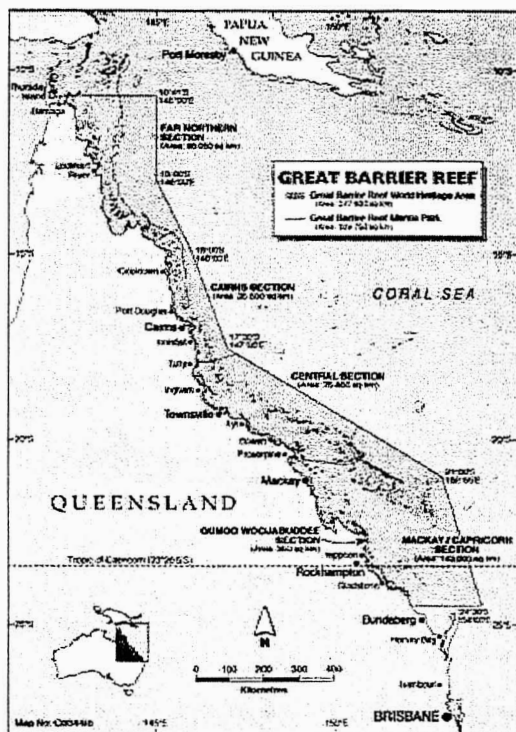


Figure 1. Location and extent of Great Barrier Reef Marine Park

The Authority's goal was then (and remains today) 'to provide for the protection, wise use, understanding and enjoyment of the Great Barrier Reef in perpetuity through the care and development of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park'. The Authority staff began the job of zoning the Park, with the first zoning area around the Capricorn Bunker region being declared in 1979. The Reef was included on the World Heritage list in 1981. Included were all the islands, notwithstanding that some had considerable development on them.

Since those early days the Marine Park has grown to be the massive area it now is. The agency remains small, with a total staffing of approximately 160 members. The agency remains small. Its management responsibilities encompass an enormous geographical area, many and conflicting uses of the marine park, such as commercial and recreational fishing, tourism, as well as the rights and entitlements of over 50 different traditional indigenous groups. Added to this list of tasks is the need to manage the health of the Reef by identifying and reducing threats to the Reef, such as water quality and climate change. GBRMPA must base its decisions on the best available information. It must also use the

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is more than 2000 km long (Figure 1). It covers 345,000 sq km – this makes it half the size of Texas, and bigger than the UK, Holland and Switzerland combined. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is not a single reef – it is actually comprised of over 2,900 reefs and 900 islands.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is a small Australian federal government statutory authority. Legislation to establish the Marine Park was enacted in 1975, and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority came into existence.

knowledge of its staff and stakeholders in order to get optimum outcomes for the management of the Marine Park.

In 1998 GBRMPA underwent a very large and comprehensive internal reorganisation (Figure 2). The intended outcome was a tighter focus for the organisation by concentrating on the major critical issues to be addressed and ensuring clear internal reporting lines and accountability for the Marine Park. Considerable effort was expended trying to design a matrix-based organization structure with 4 broad critical issues groups (Fisheries, Water Quality and Coastal Development, Tourism and Recreation, and Conservation, Biodiversity and World Heritage) and a range of support services. My parent group is the Science Technology and Information Group (STIG).

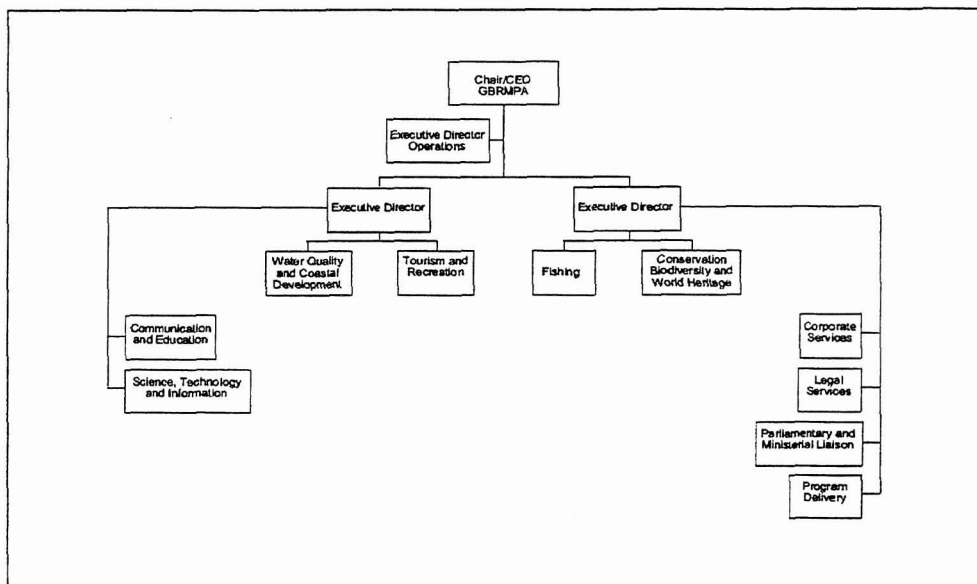


Figure 2. Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority corporate structure, after 1998 reorganisation

Science Technology and Information Group

STIG was born from our 1998 restructure. It started out being a bit of a catchall for the sections of the organization that didn't fit anywhere else. The sections are Information Technology Services, Research and Monitoring Co-ordination Unit, Spatial Data Centre, and Library and Image Services. After a year into this new structure, some of the unit managers within STIG started to see certain opportunities presenting themselves. The Critical Issues groups are responsible for developing marine park-related policy. STIG had responsibilities for information transfer, collation, dissemination and management.

However it started to become apparent that the matrix structure was not working as well as it was hoped. Critical issues groups started to develop 'tribal' or 'silo' mentalities. Information was being collected by STIG and disseminated, but it was a bit of a one-way street. People were taking that information together with their own experiences and developing a very large knowledge base - but it was 'their' own knowledge base, not necessarily a shared or corporate one.

STIG underwent a visioning exercise to attempt to identify our future role within the organization. We saw strong potential synergies developing within our group, because of the range of scientific, technical and information management skills at our disposal. So we developed a vision for the group - *GBRMPA's policies and decisions are based on the best available information*. To pursue that vision, we proposed a new initiative 'to develop and co-ordinate more effective knowledge management systems for the agency'.

With the group's support, the Library Manager established and became the Chair of the GBRMPA Knowledge Management Working Group. The group's task is: to raise corporate awareness and issues of knowledge management, identify knowledge management gaps and identify processes and tools that can be used to encourage knowledge sharing across the agency. The group is comprised of knowledge producers, information technologists, keepers of corporate knowledge, and potential clients of any knowledge management systems. The group's membership goes right across the organization, in an attempt to begin to break down those silos that had developed.

Knowledge management work to date at GBRMPA

1997/1998 saw the establishment of the first corporate Intranet, with both professional librarians being part of the development committee. During 2000/2001, STIG developed a vision for the group that incorporated the concept of knowledge management for the first time. From that vision, came the Knowledge Management Working Group.

The Knowledge Management Working Group first set out to identify what gaps existed in our corporate knowledge. We identified the following gaps: records management; individual skills/expertise; knowledge of roles of units and how they link with other units' work programs; knowledge of processes and tools which individuals used to do their jobs; corporate-wide processes for knowledge sharing; internal communications. Several of these issues have been progressed, with a pilot mentoring scheme being agreed to by staff and management and included in our last agency certified agreement.

We identified that there was a gap in support of the idea of knowledge management from our HR Management Unit. We see their input as critical when trying to address issues such as internal communication, job descriptions, job rotations and mentoring schemes. They have been less than enthusiastic due to the absence of particular staff and due to the demand on their time in other more 'critical' corporate tasks. The HR Unit manager has been away on extended leave and has only just returned. Our first communications with the newly returned HR Manager have been positive.

From a corporate point of view, the need to have a member of the senior Executive supportive was essential before we could progress. Our parent department, the Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Heritage (DEH), recently established an inter-agency committee called the DEH Knowledge Management Committee. Membership is at the senior executive level across our wider department. GBRMPA's representative is one of our 2 Executive Directors. If nothing else, membership of this high level committee has shown our Executive that DEH regards knowledge management as important enough to have 18 very senior public servants gather together regularly and discuss it!

This linkage between GBRMPA and the wider DEH has already produced synergies. Firstly, it led to interactions with the DEH Knowledge Management Director. This allowed GBRMPA to participate in a department-wide knowledge management audit based on a series of focus groups. For GBRMPA, it raised corporate awareness of knowledge management. For our own Knowledge Management Committee it has opened up lines of communications between GBRMPA and DEH. We are gaining assistance and support from DEH for new tasks for the next financial year, such as introducing an electronic records management system, and upgrading our Intranet to a Contents Management System.

Role of Library and Image Services in knowledge management at GBRMPA

In order to support ongoing corporate priorities in both information management and knowledge sharing, Library and Image Services has developed the following goal – *'to supply an effective, proactive library and image service which meets the needs of its clients and supports the wider task of corporate knowledge management'*.

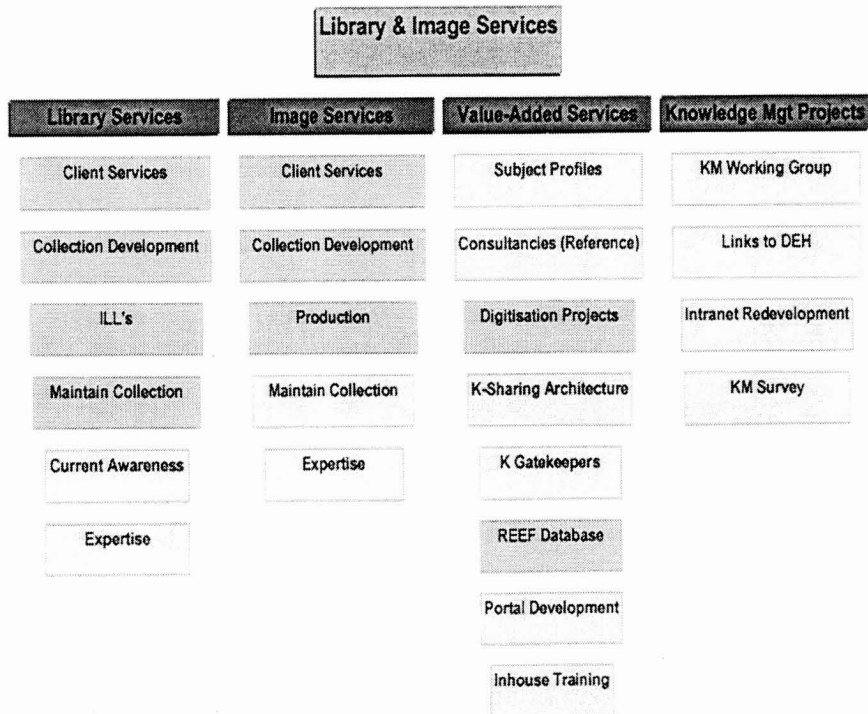


Figure 3. Current Services Provided by GBRMPA Library and Image Services (Knowledge management-related tasks appear in Yellow)

Library and Image Services perform a range of standard library services (Figure 3). We are also involved with additional work, which falls easily into the realm of knowledge management, as per diagram above. It's quite a large proportion. For us, this is all part of our service to our clients. It keeps us relevant to GBRMPA, it makes our services very client-focused and it takes advantage of our professional information management skills.

Benefits from the New Tricks

For librarians, taking the step to become involved in identified knowledge management tasks inside our parent agencies provides librarians with many benefits. Librarians of all disciplines have a basic belief in the importance of sharing information. We see it as efficient use of resources, as a way to improve decision-making processes for both individual clients and for agencies, and for the overall benefit of humankind. Involvement in knowledge management tasks allows librarians to extend that belief to the sharing of knowledge across his or her agency.

As discussed previously in this paper, knowledge management projects often require skills and working styles that librarians have.

Knowledge management projects often fail when project workers become so involved in the technologies being applied, or the knowledge management-related theory, that they lose sight of their clients' needs. Sometimes the clients' needs or client input is never sought in the first place! All librarians pride themselves on a strong client service focus. It is a cornerstone of any successful and relevant library and information management centre. Librarians bring this strong client focus to any project they undertake outside their normal library-related duties, especially knowledge management projects.

Davenport and Prusak (2000) discuss in detail the roles which librarians play in organisations. They state that librarians are often the 'knowledge brokers' or 'knowledge gatekeepers', and corporate librarians can be indispensable knowledge brokers because of a combination of their role as information guides and their personal temperaments. Librarians often make people-to-people connections as well as people-to-text connections.

Often knowledge management tasks are given a high corporate profile in an agency, with strong support from the senior management. This is rarely the case for normal library-related work. When a librarian becomes involved with a knowledge management task, there is often a personal benefit for the librarian, as suddenly their standing and profile within an agency becomes much higher. This move 'outside the box' also challenges senior management to rethink their assumptions about librarians, their skills, and their relevance to an organization.

Pitfalls for the Old Dogs

We note there are also potential pitfalls awaiting the librarian in the new role of knowledge manager. Of course, all these new tasks and projects mean more work for the librarian, who may already be feeling overloaded with his or her normal duties. It may be worth looking afresh at the existing library and information services with a view to possibly stopping some service that have outlived their usefulness, or have been replaced by new technologies or delivery methods.

Learning some new skills may also assist in making some tasks easier. When librarians are enlisted or volunteer for a knowledge management project, they should always ensure that their skills are being applied to the most relevant tasks, thus ensuring their input is the most productive. There is great risk associated with attempting to focus on tasks which fall way outside librarians skills-base, and in other professions such as human resources.

Finally, whilst librarians work on any new knowledge management tasks, they must never lose sight of the essential library and information management tasks that form the

basis for the standard library service. Special libraries in particular have very short futures when the librarians forget their primary responsibilities!

Conclusion

Bearing in mind the above issues, GBRMPA Library & Image Services continues to participate in knowledge management activities at the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. We see knowledge management as an exciting opportunity for librarians to practice what we've been preaching for years, and to both build on our existing set of professional skills and learn new ones - then to apply them internally as well as externally. This allows us to forge stronger and often new partnerships within our agency, so we can contribute to GBRMPA's capacity to create, capture and share its knowledge.

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