

Knowledge Management and the LIS professional: research perspectives

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This paper reports on Knowledge Management (KM) research conducted by Stuart Ferguson, Anne Lloyd, Philip Hider and Tricia Kelly in 2005, as part of Charles Sturt University's Community of Scholars, 'Providing Users with Information', and on current research by Lloyd and Ferguson as part of a 2006 Community of Scholars project, 'Information Literacy and Learning in Different Contexts', in association with Joy McGregor, Kirsty Williamson, Lyn Hay and James Herring. It follows up on the paper by Ferguson, Hider, Lloyd and Kelly, 'The state of knowledge: Conceptualising knowledge management for LIS practitioners and educators' (RAILS2, September, 2005), which provided an overview of the 2005 project and preliminary findings of a newspaper survey of KM job advertisements.

The 2005 KM research aimed to establish the state of knowledge of KM amongst professionals in Library and Information Services (LIS), the extent to which they have found positions in the KM sector, the extent to which they are practising identifiable KM processes in their work in the LIS sector, the level of educational preparation and/or professional development opportunities for the practice of KM, and the presence of common elements of 'best practice' that might be used as a framework for teaching KM in the LIS field.

Initial findings of survey of newspaper advertisements (reported at RAILS2) were based on twenty-one advertisements. The content of the advertisements was analysed, with respect to the attributes - knowledge, skills and attitudes - required, or desired, for each position, and compared to ALIA's list of core LIS professional attributes and those 'generic' attributes that LIS professionals share with other professionals, according to ALIA. Preliminary findings suggest that, outside of those jobs advertised on specifically LIS outlets, KM positions are generally not sufficiently covered by ALIA's definition of LIS competencies (as spelt out in its list of core knowledge and skills). Considerable contextual variation among KM positions was noted, with business valuing skills and knowledge that are derived from its own process, practices and understandings of what knowledge is valued, and the focus in library-related contexts being on encoded representations of knowledge. The fuller set of results, based on eighty-eight advertisements, draws out further conclusions for the LIS community.

Similar findings to the analysis of job advertisements are found in the literature reviews and in the survey of KM courses in Australia. The literature appears divided on the issue of overlap between the two disciplines but the weight of opinion and evidence suggests that the understanding and skills required for KM go far beyond 'traditional' LIS education. The survey of KM courses found a reasonable amount of equivalency amongst the courses but failed to find a high degree of overlap between the curricula of these courses and core LIS professional attributes, as defined by ALIA. On the contrary, there appear to be good reasons why separate KM and LIS courses have evolved since graduates of the courses are entering two distinct, if related, professions.

An online questionnaire was designed to establish (where applicable) what respondents saw as the main roles and functions of a knowledge manager; the percentage of their present work that represents KM; their understanding of the term 'knowledge management'; KM projects or developments that a library known to them has implemented or in which the library participated; ways in which what they do as a knowledge manager differ from what they did as a librarian/information manager; their perceptions of broad differences between the practices of knowledge managers and the practices of librarians; and ways in which education for LIS might better prepare people to work in the KM environment.

Current research by Lloyd and Ferguson into the commonalities between Information Literacy (IL) and KM is also reported. Ferguson's research into KM suggests an over-reliance on a model of organisational learning that builds on the dichotomy, outlined by Nonaka and Takeuchi, between what they saw as 'tacit' knowledge and 'explicit' knowledge, and the presumed interaction between the two, in which individuals learn from others and from the shared knowledge of the organisation, to create new knowledge, which in turn becomes part of corporate knowledge and thus part of a new spiral of knowledge creation. Ferguson is critical of this model and suggests that it has been more of a barrier to KM initiatives than an enabler, despite the relative maturity of KM in many sectors.

A more productive approach, it is suggested, is to build on research into workplace IL. The workplace study outlined in this paper argues that IL must be understood in context - the process of becoming information literate occurs within a social context and the skills that relate to information literacy occur in ways which are valued by the context. It is recommended, therefore, that for KM to be effective it is important for managers to understand, first, what information is valued by the community of practice, second, the modalities of information that influence knowledge development and, third, the practices that influence transfer of information between individuals or groups within an organization, and which ultimately reside as sites of knowledge that can be mined.

The paper draws on Lloyd's research into workplace IL and the way in which it illustrates the depth and complexity of information literacy as a process, by seeking to uncover and describe the relationships and structures that influence an individual's entry into an information environment, such as a workplace or an educational setting, and to uncover the factors that influence a new worker's developing

relationship with information. Such an approach to IL sees experience of social, physical and textual sources of information and the interconnection amongst them as critical to understanding IL as a phenomenon. It is presented here as a more practical approach to learning organisations and KM for the LIS community than the models currently popular in the business community.