

The SMR Knowledge Services e-Profile
March, 2007

Nancy Davenport: Bringing Knowledge Services to the Larger Library Community

by Guy St. Clair



Much attention is being given to the role of knowledge services in the broader research field. Particularly within specialized libraries and other knowledge services functions that seek to converge information, knowledge, and strategic learning specifically for the benefit of the parent organization, there is now much talk about knowledge services and how the applications associated with knowledge development and knowledge sharing (KD/KS) impact organizational success.

We are now about to see attention to knowledge services in another setting. With its emphasis on supporting research, contextual decision-making, and innovation, knowledge services – as a management and service delivery framework – seems destined to have a similar impact on what is commonly (and probably inaccurately) referred to as “traditional” or “classical” librarianship. The many practitioners in the library and information science (LIS) profession are deeply involved in practicing the three disciplines and converging them for the benefit of their patrons. According to some observers (and some of the practitioners themselves), these libraries and library managers have been doing so for many years.

“It’s a role we’ve always played,” says Nancy Davenport. “As librarians, we haven’t necessarily articulated our work as something specifically called ‘knowledge services,’ but when that idea is defined as converging information management, knowledge management, and learning into a single service delivery framework, I can’t see that it is much different from what we’ve always done – or what we’ve strived to do – in our libraries. Even if we’ve not always been successful, our very tasks have been in this direction. Helping our patrons get to the information they require, then helping them – when they ask us – to assist them in transforming that information into knowledge, and then guiding them as they seek to apply that knowledge in whatever way they expect to use it, these are all part and parcel of what librarianship is all about. And that ‘strategic learning’ we talk about so much? Well, it, too, is part of what we do. Librarianship has always been about helping patrons apply what they learn in the library to their work and their goals for success, regardless of how they define that success.”

As a leader in librarianship and currently a candidate for the presidency of the American Library Association (ALA), Davenport is fully qualified to speak about knowledge services. ALA is the world’s oldest and largest library association, with some 64,000 members at last count, and as such the organization has unparalleled influence among library managers, community leaders with responsibility for library funding, academic administrators and research leaders, and of course among the many millions of citizens who use libraries. It is no small tribute to Davenport’s own leadership that she has been selected to stand for election (disclosure: this author is listed among those who have endorsed Davenport in the election), and she has very specific ideas about the role of libraries in society, including how libraries can be part of the societal effort to, as she puts it at her campaign website, “ensure renaissance minds in the digital age.” Alluding to her presidency of the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), Davenport talks quite frankly about how she worked “at the intersection of libraries, scholarship, and technology,” noting that each has a role to play in the “academy’s future.”

Let’s build on that. If we use Davenport’s phrase – “the intersection of libraries, scholarship, and technology” – as an approach to a definition of knowledge, and of the role of knowledge in the larger society, it is not such a stretch to make the connection between librarianship and knowledge services more direct.

Indeed, for Davenport her interest in the subject goes to that next level, for she is one of an informal group of thought leaders who come together to consider the role of knowledge in society. Thinking about how to connect knowledge services and librarianship is a natural for her. With her colleagues, Davenport is interested in trying to understand the extent to which knowledge and successful knowledge management affect society at large. It is a fairly common occurrence when they get together from time to time to talk about these things, and in their conversations, a frequent topic of discussion has to do with identifying the appropriate mechanism or vehicle for delivering knowledge to the larger society. For Davenport, the library is precisely the organization to play this role in society. In her opinion, libraries will be the medium through which the role of knowledge (and, indeed, its value) for addressing societal issues will be understood and recognized.

Sadly, though, how libraries are defined and described, she says, simply confuses the issue.

“I’m not very interested in those categories I hear people use,” she says. “For me, talking about ‘traditional’ libraries or ‘classical’ librarianship seems to miss the point. Of course there are special libraries and resource centers and information centers that have a particular role in providing knowledge services for specific parent organizations, but the overall product of knowledge services delivery in any library is not so different from what is provided in *all* libraries or ‘library-like’ operations. The function is to work with the patron – or whatever that user is called – to identify what information he or she requires and then to see that the patron has access to that information. From there the whole knowledge services process continues, on through the KM and the strategic learning, to get the patron where he or she is seeking to go. It’s all part of what the LIS profession aims for, and has always aimed for. So from my perspective, libraries – however structured – are the logical and natural vehicle for taking knowledge into the larger societal sphere, even into the much-talked-about global society. It’s a logical and natural step for librarianship.”

As for that old chestnut that “libraries are nothing but a storehouse of books nobody wants to buy” or its companion cliché, that “anything you need you can get on the Internet,” Davenport is, not unexpectedly, not very patient.

“It’s a question of ignorance,” she says, “and when people come to me and say those things – which they do all the time because I am, after all, a librarian and this is the kind of thing people say to librarians! – I try to turn the conversation around. I ask them where they would go for the books they cannot get for themselves and I ask them what they do when they discover that the information they’ve found for themselves isn’t very good. Or useful. They soon realize that the services of the librarian and the function of a library are vastly different from that ignorant concept they came into the conversation with! And perhaps I shouldn’t be so tough on them. Perhaps it isn’t ignorance. Perhaps they are just uninformed, although truth to tell, I don’t see how we could provide much more information about libraries to the public. We are always promoting libraries and serving as advocates for libraries – in fact one of the platforms of my campaign is to look at how we can do more of this sort of thing – but I continue to be surprised that there are still people in our society who just don’t understand how useful libraries can be for them.”

So the library – for anyone who comes into Davenport’s range – is not a book warehouse and its influence in the age of the Internet goes right to the core of enabling people to find the best information, and it is information that is authoritative, timely, and meets the needs of the person seeking it.

“Of course,” Davenport says, responding as if the obviousness of the statement couldn’t be more clear.

“And that’s exactly what knowledge services – as a service delivery methodology – is. It is what libraries and librarianship have been doing ever since they came into existence. Libraries are the original knowledge-sharing institutions, and librarians – working in this environment – are the original knowledge services professionals.”

How Davenport’s influence and her leadership in the profession will continue is the subject of much of her colleagues’ conversations these days. And thanks to the national focus of her career, she is in a position to talk about the importance of libraries – however structured and however designated – and the role libraries play in the successful achievement of national and international goals.

“It’s all about reasoned policy making and creating a learning society,” she says, and with her background, she is certainly an intellectual leader who comfortably combines policy analysis with the practical specifics of library and information services management. In her long career at the Library of Congress, in her Presidency of the Council on Library and Information Resources, in her service to the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (representing The Librarian of Congress, as Dr. James Billington is a statutory member of the Commission), and in her present

consultancy as Interim Director of Public Services for the D.C. Public Library, that “intersection” Davenport speaks about takes on a face of its own. There simply aren’t many people who have her breadth of experience with the theoretical and the practical, at least in the LIS environment, and to have Nancy Davenport as an advocate for libraries and the role of libraries in assessing and structuring knowledge services for society is an advantage long awaited by many, both within the profession and among those who work with the profession. Under her influence, commonly held perceptions about libraries and library-like organizations are about to change.

The specifics of that change are described at Davenport’s campaign website (www.nancydavenport.info). For her, much of the focus concentrates on that third discipline of knowledge services, the strategic learning that converges with information management and KM to create a successful knowledge interaction between the knowledge services professional (or “the librarian,” if you will) and the person seeking guidance, the patron. For Davenport, the whole framework of education and lifelong learning moves from *strategic* learning, referring to how people use learning for practical and utilitarian purposes (*i.e.*, how they can do their work better), to an even more important, higher-level connection with knowledge.

“To me,” Davenport says, “education and lifelong learning in today’s society is a two-pronged effort, and again, it is through our libraries that we can succeed. Here I’m speaking about lifelong learning for the public as well as for the practitioners who make up the LIS profession. In today’s society, we have the need, we have the technology, and we have the support from most segments of society. And if we don’t have the support, we can get it just by working harder with our advocacy and awareness-raising efforts. But in the end, what it all comes down to is that we in this profession are the ideal and natural drivers for knowledge services, and for enabling a knowledge society. It’s our role, our responsibility, and no one can do it better. We’ll be foolish – and just a little bit selfish – if we don’t figure out how we can bring the premise of knowledge services to society, and do it through our libraries. And in doing so, we are contributing to and guaranteeing a knowledge society, at all edges of the social spectrum and across all borders. That is not such a bad thing to be attempting.”

Clearly, it is leaders like Nancy Davenport who are positioning us – as a society – for a very bright future. If only we’ll listen to her.

Contact Information:

Nancy Davenport, President
Nancy Davenport & Associates LLC
5606 Dawes Avenue
Alexandria VA 22311 USA
Tel: 703.965.0253
nancydavenport@nancydavenport.info
www.nancydavenport.info

The author. Guy St. Clair is the President and Consulting Specialist for Knowledge Services at SMR International, a management consulting practice in New York, NY USA. He writes frequently on knowledge services for practitioners in research and knowledge management.