

## Rebecca Vargha: Exploring Knowledge Services in South Africa

by Guy St. Clair



The products of knowledge services are the same, regardless of whether the organization is following the discipline as a management methodology or as a service delivery framework. In either role, knowledge services exists to enable research, contextual decision-making, and innovation.

It was a point well made when a group of information professionals participated in a recent visit to the Republic of South Africa. The group was led by Rebecca Vargha, the Librarian at the School of Information and Library Science (SILS) at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and the current President of SLA. Traveling with Vargha were 13 information professionals who took the opportunity to meet with professional colleagues in environments different than their own.

Arranged by People to People International, the famous humanitarian organization founded in 1956 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the group's visit was organized to reflect the People to People International purpose, described at the organization's site ([www.ptpi.org](http://www.ptpi.org)): to enhance international understanding and friendship through educational, cultural and humanitarian activities involving the exchange of ideas and experiences directly among peoples of different countries and diverse cultures. At the professional level, such exchanges obviously result in enhanced understanding.

Vargha, who has professional responsibility in a variety of functional roles, finds a place for all three knowledge services products in her work, and she was particularly interested to see how information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning converge in a country that has so recently evolved into a functioning and open society. As librarian for SILS since 2001, Vargha has management responsibility for providing research support not just for the school's library. As a member of the school's master's committee she also participates in the SILS curriculum development program, an especially important responsibility at this particular time in the history of graduate library and information science (LIS) education. Thus for Vargha, the research function is never far from her mind, and she delights in arranging the convergence of information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning in support of research and research management at UNC SILS (which is, incidentally, currently one of two American graduate LIS programs tied in the top-ranked place in the popular *U.S. News & World Report* annual survey of graduate programs, adding even more pressure to the SILS curriculum development effort).

As a special librarian (although employed in an academic setting and an employee of an academic library), Vargha also represents a growing number of information professionals for whom participating in contextual decision-making is critical in the day-to-day management activities not only of the specialized library, but in that of the larger organization as well. She clearly understands the role of specialized librarianship, since before coming to SILS Vargha was employed in the corporate community, in both the not-for-profit and for-profit sectors, all of which has contributed to her success in her most challenging "job" to date (and it is a volunteer job at that!). As President of SLA, the international association representing the interests of thousands of information professionals in over 83 countries worldwide, Vargha understands the value of contextual decision-making, possibly even more than many of her fellow special librarians. In that branch of the LIS profession, contextual decision-making simply drives the work effort, and here again, Vargha's commitment to the knowledge services construct gives her a secure base for meeting her professional responsibilities, both as an employee and as a volunteer.

For Vargha, though, it is in the support of innovation that knowledge services leads with strength, and it was "innovation-in-practice," you might say, that most intrigued Vargha on the trip to South Africa.

“I had some ideas about what I would see in the way of professional strengths,” Vargha says, “but the innovative approach to dealing with some of the issues this new country is facing is nevertheless very impressive. When there has been a complete turnaround in the government of a country, all sectors are affected, and when I think about some of what I witnessed in South Africa, ‘innovation’ is just about the only word to describe what is happening there.”

As a first example, Vargha speaks about the education of information professionals.

“Library and information science professionals are trained and educated differently than in our country,” she said, noting that education is a major challenge in the larger society. As a consequence, the education of librarians is equally fraught with challenges. In fact, as Vargha points out, some library schools are not able to continue to function and are closing.

On the other hand, for those library schools that can continue and want to do so, in order to meet the demands of society and build for the future, innovation is key, as Vargha points out. She describes how successful library and information science programs are innovative, noting, for example, that “the schools are not at all reluctant about including knowledge management and KM informatics in the curriculum, and the schools are recognizing that these are basic to their graduates’ success after they leave the program. Equally important, serious attention being given to innovative programs such as the development of internship programs, a situation possibly driven by the lack of subject expertise in many of the LIS graduates who come to work in specialized libraries after they have completed their education.”

Another challenge is similar to one being experienced in the education of LIS professionals in her own country.

“Just like us,” Vargha says, “the profession has leadership issues. There is a leadership shortage in the LIS profession, and it’s a shortage very similar to what we have in the States, in that we are not training our LIS professionals to be leaders in their organizations.”

This particular challenge, Vargha notes, is being met in part through the efforts of groups like the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA), and particularly its Special Libraries and Information Group (SLIG). “Dynamic leadership” is a specific goal of the group, which clearly acknowledges that there are major educational barriers that must be addressed and includes in its mission statement a commitment to providing “equitable access to information” to “all communities (literate and illiterate) in South Africa.” It is a commitment that Vargha and her colleagues saw put into practice everywhere they went, with innovative solutions simply expected as a given. LIASA SLIG, for example, is working on two current initiatives, to define a strategic role of information professionals in the workplace, and to develop junior staff for employment in specialized libraries. In the practice of knowledge services in South Africa, the “old ways” are clearly giving way to the new if the old ways won’t work in the new LIS workplace.

“Think about the situation with reading,” Vargha suggests. “South Africa is a country that is working hard to bring all its citizens to a higher and sustainable level of literacy, but for many of its people, reading did not have an established role in their society. The idea of a ‘reading culture,’ you might say, was not in place, so major efforts have to be made.”

One of Vargha’s favorite stories tells about the group’s visit to the Shine Center at the Observatory Junior School in Cape Town. The center promotes reading among young people from historically disadvantaged communities, and trained volunteers work with the children, helping with their reading in English (the country has eleven official languages, so helping people with their English is a goal for many reasons).

As it so happens, the LIS collection where Vargha is employed has a specialization in children’s books (the subject is also a personal interest), and she took along gifts of children’s books for the students.

“It was an amazing experience,” she says, “and one that impressed me as much as anything else we saw. In South Africa, there seems to be a dearth of illustrators, artists, and people working with children’s literature, which probably isn’t hard to understand. I doubt if we had many people doing that kind of creative work when our country was just ten or twelve years old, so we shouldn’t be surprised. But these children loved the books, and I loved giving them to the students and reading to them from the books.”

Vargha’s innovation-in-practice visit in South Africa continued with an in-depth look at the management of the Robben Island Mayibuye Archives at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Although the museum itself is strong in a traditional museum sense, its collection of artifacts, historical documents, photographs, art works and audio-visual material is huge, and managing these materials is no minor undertaking.

“For many of us in the group,” Vargha says, “the visit to the UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives was a real eye-opener.”

Herself no stranger to museums and archives, having been Chair of SLA's Museums, Arts, and Humanities Division and, earlier in her career, assistant librarian at the National Humanities Center in Research Triangle Park, NC, Vargha takes a special interest in museum archives. She and her colleagues on the trip found themselves somewhat in awe of the innovative approach to archives management at the Robben Island Museum. In many ways, the collections represent a sort of "inside" history of the struggle against apartheid, with people risking their lives to make a record of the struggle against apartheid so post-apartheid research would have a body of knowledge to work with, and that level of enthusiasm and forward-thinking is evident in the managing the archives.

"What I think most impressed me," Vargha says, "is the level of innovation in collecting and managing this material. The archives are vast, with more than 100,000 photographs, for example, and some 10,000 film and video recordings. The sound recordings alone are just overwhelming in number, it seems to me. There are 34 different collections, in various media ranging from vinyl to tapes to everything in between, and it is all being digitized. What an undertaking!"

An equally stimulating experience was the group's visit to the South Africa's National Science Foundation in Pretoria. There, innovation seems to have been built into the very management of the organization, with library and information services provided through the organization's Information and Strategy Advice Unit (ISA) and the ISA's function put forward in its tag-line: "Striving for excellence in innovative information and knowledge management services." Currently undergoing a restructure, the unit continues to be notable in its delivery of KM/knowledge services in four areas: content resources, records and document management, communities of practice, and data analysis and transformation. This was exactly the level of innovation that Vargha and her colleagues went to South Africa to see, and they came away very satisfied with their findings.

"Clearly South African LIS professionals have a strong handle on moving forward with knowledge services," Vargha concludes. "It seems obvious to me that, despite the awful trials of just a few years ago, there has been a major move forward into the implementation of KM/knowledge services on a very broad scale. It's not a question of 'catching up,' though. What it is, it seems to me, is a way of looking at just how good service delivery can be, and then putting as much effort as possible into using knowledge services as a framework for making it happen. I'm happy I had the opportunity to visit these innovators with my colleagues. Now my goal is to seek that level of innovation in my own work."

**Contact Information:**

Rebecca B. Vargha  
Librarian  
Information and Library Science Library  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
115B Manning Hall CB# 3360  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514-3360

Phone: 919-962-8361  
Fax: 919-962-8071  
Email: [vargha@ils.unc.edu](mailto:vargha@ils.unc.edu)

**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.