

Putting it Together – Creating New Leaders for the Knowledge Culture by Marcie Stone

Link by link, making the connections... Bit by bit, putting it together... Gathering supporters and adherents....
(From: **Sunday In The Park With George**, Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, 1984)



As special libraries evolve into knowledge services, as librarians morph into knowledge leaders, and as organizational roles expand and transform, library schools are recognizing that the new environment requires a shift in professional education. They are adopting the Information School (iSchool) philosophies and practices to create professionals who are in tune with the demands of the emerging knowledge professions.

This model dovetails very neatly with the goal of creating an enterprise-wide knowledge culture, one that ensures the realization of an organization's vision and the achievement of the organizational mission. By deploying knowledge services as the management and delivery framework for knowledge development and knowledge sharing (KD/KS), the organization positions itself for excellence in knowledge asset management, enhanced contextual decision making, accelerated innovation, and, if the larger organization is a research-focused enterprise, higher-level research.

For a closer look at how today's information school students are preparing to become the knowledge leaders of the future, we've been talking with Nancy Gershenfeld, a Senior Lecturer at the [University of Washington iSchool](#). At the UW Information School, one of the group of schools now called the iCaucus, the focus is on changing how people look at information, and the principal attributes iSchools have in common are described at the [iCaucus](#) web site:

The iSchools are interested in the relationship between information, people and technology. This is characterized by a commitment to learning and understanding the role of information in human endeavors. The iSchools take it as given that expertise in all forms of information is required for progress in science, business, education, and culture. This expertise must include [an] understanding of the uses and users of information, as well as information technologies and their applications.

As a former corporate librarian – and as one of the designers of the evolving curriculum – Nancy Gershenfeld is in an ideal position to examine the education of tomorrow's information services practitioners in the context of real-world environments. And although she reached her current position by a less-than-traditional route, her career before coming to the iSchool has paralleled the emergence of the new corporate knowledge/information culture. She held jobs as an information specialist and online database training specialist for a market research firm; a litigation support database manager for a law firm; and an information management consultant – all before she got her MLIS! While she was getting her degree, she achieved her goal of joining Microsoft, where her career

progressed from online database design and retrieval, through information management and automated library systems, to library management and the library's parent organization, Information Services.

At Microsoft, Nancy worked on teams that implemented the first PC-based client-server library system, developed the very first Windows graphical interface for a library catalog, created new ways to deliver electronic information to the desktop of all employees, and produced information solutions in the face of "Internet time." As Library Operations Manager, she was responsible for all phases of library operations, and her achievements included expanding online services to subsidiaries worldwide, managing the construction of (and the move to) a new library facility, and developing and defending budgets to support all of these endeavors. Her final position at Microsoft took her beyond the library to the job of Business Operations Manager for the entire Information Services organization, including the library, archives, museum, research, web publishing, and employee communications functions.

In her theoretical spare time while she was on the Microsoft staff, Nancy began teaching at the UW's (then) Graduate School of Library and Information Science. As a logical next step, following her departure from Microsoft she was appointed as a faculty member of the newly launched and highly innovative UW Information School. The timing couldn't have been better; at the same time that the university recognized the necessity to make a radical change in educating information professionals, it was able to take advantage of Nancy's wide experience in innovation leadership.

As a non-tenured faculty member, Nancy has the luxury of concentrating on her classes and students. Over the past eight years her teaching has been focused on the management of resources and services for non-traditional library and information environments, concentrating on how best to align those resources and services with the strategic goals of an organization. Among the courses she has taught are Library Automation Systems, The Information Life Cycle, Business Information Resources, Management of Information Organizations, and Special Librarianship. Her experience and broad expertise have made her one of the primary go-to faculty members for students and colleagues alike, and her insider knowledge of the specialized library world *and* the academic environment offer a unique perspective of the requirements and goals of educating the next generation of professionals.

[Managing the Content-Technology-User Relationship](#). Closing the divide between information content and content delivery technologies is one of the most significant characteristics of the iSchool philosophy. When information professionals began to exploit the Internet and web technology as legitimate tools, there was at least a divide, if not a rivalry, between those who were most interested in what a web site had to say, and those who were more concerned with the technology by which the message was delivered. Thanks to the iSchools' recognition that these two aspects are inextricably connected, students are now emerging with an appreciation for both spheres: an understanding of the relationship between the content and the user, and a practical ability to select and tailor appropriate technologies to meet specific information content delivery requirements.

Integrating knowledge management, information management, and knowledge services into a configuration that serves the entire organization creates an environment in which the traditional roles of librarians (and other knowledge workers) and IT workers are combined to provide optimum benefit to the individual worker and to the corporate whole. The iSchool curriculum, with its emphasis on the relationships among information, people, and technology, can be seen as an ideal vehicle by which to accomplish this transformation.

So what are the most significant changes in the profession in the past 20 years, and how do they translate into changes in professional education? How are the iSchools preparing their graduates to become change managers and knowledge thought leaders in their organizations?

One of the keys to developing the kind of thinking that's necessary to lead innovation is the ability to see commonalities that exist among different types of organizations. Drawing on her diverse background, Nancy applies the experience she has acquired in corporate settings to all kinds of information environments. In her classes, she demonstrates what works in other (non-information) types of organizations and how these approaches can be successfully utilized in an information organization, even (or perhaps especially) public libraries. One illustration she likes to use when she discusses business models is the example of E-Bay's influence on public libraries' move from a traditional book sale to the online market, establishing a lower-cost alternative that ultimately can result in higher returns. Even the advent of the espresso bar in the public library can be traced back to the commercial sector!

Emerging – and Changing – Connections. Since Nancy teaches courses in reference, library management, and special libraries, our conversation segued back and forth between her areas of expertise and, as we talked, we kept coming back to the notion of connections. We discussed how the relationships with the external customers and the corporation as an entity have changed, and how the connections among the various aspects of the profession have shifted to accommodate the new position that the knowledge organization occupies within the larger organization. This piece of the conversation led to another common theme – strategic awareness and its significance for the development of the knowledge culture as well as for the success and survival of the knowledge organization. In light of the heightened focus on performance metrics, we also talked about changes in how success is defined and measured. Although we did not discuss the iSchool curriculum in this respect, it is clear that Nancy's observations are informed by her prior career experience and reflected in her teaching and curriculum development activities.

The first connection we examined was that between the customer and the traditional information organization and practitioner. In the early- to mid-1980's, when Nancy was working for FIND/SVP (now Guideline), a for-profit information provider, the relationship between the user and the provider was very straightforward (and, somewhat reminiscent of Tarzan: me librarian, you customer) The customer asked, FIND/SVP provided. The same held true with Nancy's work in legal research. Although the outcome definition was more strategic as it involved a larger organizational view, the attorneys were provided with the information they needed to successfully conduct litigation. They asked, the information staff provided, and the outcome of the case defined success.

Nancy considers news feeds to be a prime example of the way in which the information organization needs to manage its relationship with the user and as a result periodically reexamine user requirements and preferences. In 1990 the Microsoft library's news service was limited to a push email process, with the profile-based contents compiled by the library staff from Dialog alerts and sent out in individual emails. Even with the advent of more sophisticated news delivery services that are controlled by the user and feed directly to the desktop, or are published for easy review and retrieval, some people still want that hand-constructed push and consider it an important perk of working at Microsoft. This message, when conveyed to the UW iSchool students, illustrates the key point that while the knowledge worker needs to embrace and adapt changes in the information environment, it's equally important to understand what the users want and what's going to work best for them as individuals.

Although there may have been strategic goals in the traditional environment for the information organization, they were typically not reflective of the corporate goals of the parent organization (or of the customers, in the case of a company like FIND/SVP). While the work of the information staff may have reflected the strategic plans of the "corporation" there was typically little effort to use these goals to design information services, and the relationship with the larger organization was largely reactive, with success measured in relatively short-term outcomes, such as (in the case of FIND/SVP) how many

customers subscribed, how much they paid for the subscriptions, and the rate of subscription renewal. In this context, key relationships were highly traditional and frequently hierarchical. The library manager would follow the formal hierarchy of the company in the course of achieving recognition for the information staff, in requesting funding, or in bringing about changes to library services.

As this picture began to change, with new technologies creating more sophisticated users and new demands on the information organization, increased awareness of corporate strategies became necessary for survival. During Nancy's time at Microsoft, changes in the library's focus were driven by the different directions in which the company expanded both operationally and in sheer size, which increased about six-fold during her time there. The dynamic nature of the company led to directional shifts which frequently took the information staff by surprise, such as when, for example, Microsoft made the decision to enter the kids' software market. When this new enterprise was announced, the library had absolutely no relevant collection, but within a week staff had managed to start developing expertise about K-12 education and child development and the industries that support them, including the field's principal resources and key players. And then there was the time that Microsoft partnered with DreamWorks, and Nancy found Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen walking down the hall, accompanied by the Microsoft leadership team, from Bill Gates and Patty Stonesifer on down – leading to the eternal question, “Now what!?!”.

Matching Knowledge Strategy with Corporate Strategy. Recognizing the necessity to stay ahead of such a fast-paced corporate culture led information services staff to become more plugged in to the nuances of corporate planning and to begin developing alliances that would be their early warning system. Not only does maintaining the connection with corporate strategy improve the organizational position of the knowledge staff, it also helps preclude surprise directional shifts. In this way, surprises won't happen as often, and the collection, services and programs will anticipate changes, rather than trying to keep up with them. It also positions the information staff as an integral resource for corporate long-term planning. The resulting improvement in knowledge services will increase the realization that the information organization is a strategic partner and will improve its visibility and bolster the use of knowledge services. Success in this context is realized when the corporate staff consistently thinks of the library as the place to start when they're looking for information about anything.

The previously mentioned news feeds illustrate the balancing act that is necessary as information services emerge as a strategic partner. Even when the library has connected with corporate goals, has articulated them, and has positioned itself strategically to be identified as an integral part of the company's success, it is still paramount to meet the expectations of the individual employees. Oh, yes, and do all this within the allocated resources framework. This is the time for setting priorities and for tough love for the customers – “we're sorry that we no longer subscribe to the magazine that you've come to love, but we'll be happy to find you another source for it”.

In Nancy's experience (and as she tells students), the traditional library's physical position was one of the principal keys to its success – as centrally located as possible so that it was easy to find and a constant, visible presence. Now the way in which the knowledge leaders connect to the rest of the corporation is a primary factor in achieving a (virtual) central position in the corporation by becoming a strategic partner. Since it is vital for knowledge leaders to identify who can help them, these connections should be deliberate and based on an awareness of the informal, as well as formal, power structure within the organization. Replacing the former vertical stovepipes that represented corporate communication, the new paradigm encompasses horizontal, diagonal, or even circular relationships. While this may make knowledge leadership's job more difficult, as the lines of connection are more subtle, the effort is rewarded by acquiring relationships that increase the visibility and acknowledged value of knowledge services and assist in solidifying the knowledge organization's position.

And, in the context of knowledge services' central position within an organization, one of the most important realizations the students take away is that the information organization has a uniquely comprehensive view of corporate activity. The knowledge staff is (or becomes) aware of the subjects of questions, research requests, and those persistent news feed emails, and should foster cross-conversation — the foundation of knowledge sharing and strategic learning — within the corporation. Utilized to best advantage, this central position makes the knowledge staff the connective resource for the whole enterprise, as well as the source of knowledge solutions to achieve strategic goals.

Once the students have assimilated the importance of both identifying strategic relationships, and of connecting with strategic goals, they will be sensitive to the vital role that the knowledge staff plays in cultivating informed decision-making throughout the organization. When the mission of the knowledge organization is aligned with the overall organizational mission, the knowledge staff becomes more aware of their contribution to corporate success. This leads to the recognition that supporting and participating in informed decision-making is one of the chief values of any knowledge organization; it is also a prime way to achieve recognition as a key player in the organization's success, sharpening corporate awareness of the value of the information organization.

Since decisions supported by knowledge services take all forms in the non-traditional knowledge organization, success can become more difficult to define, and anecdotal evidence may be the best option. However, at times it is as clear as a profit-loss statement. When the knowledge team provides research that supports litigation that saves the company a half-million dollars, or assists in winning a significant new account or contract — and corporate leadership recognizes the knowledge contribution — success is very evident. Concrete examples such as these are critical in furnishing the basis for corporate leaders to articulate the value of KD/KS. When nobody can state how you contribute, then you're in jeopardy, but an acknowledgement of strategic worth is a powerful multiplier of the strength of the knowledge organization's position.

Becoming an integral, strategic part of the organization's success is both the impetus for and a result of restructuring the connections and boundaries among the various aspects of information services. As Nancy and I talked about the ways in which information/knowledge management, knowledge services, knowledge development, knowledge sharing, and information technology (to name a few) are merging and being regrouped, Nancy observed that she sees the various roles of the information professional on a continuum that ranges from the information request to the person who keeps the server running. In middle, we find selection, collection, organization, and the design and fielding of tools to house, organize, and publish information.

Relating the roles along this continuum to the iSchool, Nancy observed that there are MLIS graduates who have filled each of them — even the primarily technical slots. She then added that the more IT-oriented graduates would have been part of the Master of Science in Information Management program, had it existed at the time that they were in school, although there are also current students with IT backgrounds who have chosen to follow the MLIS track. However, equally important to educating for a specific set of skills is creating the awareness that knowledge leaders, whatever their degree or work title, need a comprehensive understanding of all of the roles and the skill sets that comprise the knowledge organization. Using the development of a taxonomy tool as an example, Nancy posited that the Informatics B.A. graduates would use their programming and design skills to create the tool; the MSIM graduate would be the program manager for the development and fielding of the tool; and the MLIS graduate would manage the team that builds the vocabulary.

New Tools and New Roles. Nancy Gershenfeld also feels that the MLIS program prepares its graduates to understand the linkages between what the user wants to know, how they're going to be seeking it,

and what the people behind the scenes were thinking when they created the tools with which to find it. This means that MLIS graduates, who are more likely to be the overall leaders of knowledge services and KD/KS programs, need to be able to speak the languages of all of the practitioners. Although you may not be able to write code, you need to talk to the programmers and software engineers in a credible way and to understand why they make specific decisions so you will be able both to contribute to the tool's design and explain the design to the user. The ability to communicate these different perspectives is a professional skill that will go far in making the necessary connections between user and designer and result in developing tools that will best meet the users' needs. Nancy's example is that, while users may be marketing staff who need to know things completely and quickly, the person who created the tool may not have been aware of the specific requirements of the actual user, and based the design on the fact that the putative user would be in the office at 3:00 AM without anybody to help them. This same paradigm can be found in facilitating knowledge sharing and strategic learning and in creating the applications that support the organization's knowledge culture.

As the roles filled by knowledge workers realign, it becomes even more important to be able to see what each accomplishes. One example that recurred in our conversation was the expansion of reference and retrieval into an analysis capability. It is a given that the day has passed when a reference librarian would hand a client a bibliography or provide a published source. In today's knowledge workplace, it is incumbent on the practitioner to help the user recognize the validity of the various sources, identify their particular perspectives, and be aware of their suitability to a specific requirement. The knowledge professional must present the user with analysis, insights, and specific guidance rather than just information itself.

The ultimate test, and one of Nancy's favorite assignments, is to ask students to develop a package that will make an executive smart about a complex topic (such as an entire industry) overnight. It's the reference sources, the understanding of the corporate and industry cultures, the awareness of corporate goals for the upcoming meeting, and the successful packaging that all contribute to the success of the effort and of the strategic learning that it represents. It is also the kind of connection between knowledge services and the user that can result in increased support for KD/KS throughout the organization. Again, her example is based on a real-world experience at Microsoft – "Bill's going to a meeting tomorrow and..."

So here we are once more, looking at connections – finding the unspoken relationships in the data and between the data and the user's requirement. For successful knowledge development – and to become a strategic participant in the organization – the knowledge professional needs to be aware of how the information being requested is relevant to the user's work and how it ties in with the larger organization's mission and goals. Carried to the next level, such hyper-awareness goes beyond individual questions to the strategic activities that they reflect, and enables the knowledge leader to make the links between knowledge services and organizational goals.

To this end, Nancy asks her students to write case studies in which they make connections and draw conclusions from the unspoken, to develop the ability to see the relationships among apparently disparate information. We recalled the movie "Working Girl" in which Melanie Griffith combines bits and pieces of news into a coherent whole that enables her to advance in the corporation, get a better wardrobe and hairstyle, and land Harrison Ford. And while Harrison Ford may not be the reward for good knowledge sharing, corporate success certainly can be.

One of the major new developments that has emerged from the expansion of knowledge professionals' roles is the use of advanced knowledge-sharing technologies, such as Web 2.0 applications, to further corporate goals. A good example of this was explored in the recent e-Profile of [Susan Fifer Canby](#) and

the knowledge culture at the National Geographic Society. For her part, Nancy has been delighted to find that previous graduates are calling the iSchool looking for current students or new graduates who can help them develop new programs and software applications, and to implement the new tools. The logical extension of such requests, and a sure sign of the iSchool's success, are the calls Nancy receives asking her to recommend a new graduate for a specific position. These developments then lead to another connection – the one between the organization and the school – that benefit both on a long-term basis.

Teaching Knowledge Leadership and Change Management. Given all these variables, how do the knowledge managers and staff make the necessary connections to guide the development of a knowledge sharing culture? Sharing can be inherent in smaller organizations with a single goal, but in larger corporations, high-level communication, non-disruptive processes, and an energized and imaginative knowledge organization are principal keys to success. Obviously, the ideal situation is to engage the organization's leaders, have them repeatedly and consistently emphasize the importance of sharing information, and then themselves become enthusiastic participants in the process. Still, procedures and tools are equally (if not more) important – if it's not easy, it's not going to happen! This is when the perspective of the knowledge leader combines with an expertise in IT capabilities; the resulting synthesis produces technical solutions necessary to get organizational buy-in so vital to success in knowledge sharing.

Teaching how to spark the evolution of knowledge sharing and a strategic learning culture is an acknowledged challenge; at the UW iSchool, collaborative thinking (an ultimate connection?) is a major part of the coursework. With students participating in group projects, an awareness of the importance of knowledge sharing is developed, and students get experience in creating processes and strategies for doing so. Beyond class assignments, students also have a variety of opportunities to experience the practical aspects of working in a real-world setting – formal directed field work, independent study, and a culminating “Capstone” experience all allow them to apply their newly acquired expertise. These experiences are also a prime example of KD/KS and strategic learning – the students benefit from the experience and the organization with which they are working benefits from their enthusiasm and their knowledge of cutting edge practices. The perfect example? The organization that created a new job for an intern researcher when she reached the end of her internship because she had become an essential employee. Thus, she not only completed her requirements for graduation, but got a job in the bargain!

In looking at the kind of students the school seeks and the practitioners it produces, Nancy and I began discussing change leadership. Are we managing change or creating it? And do the students want to have leadership roles in whatever it is that's being accomplished? Nancy observed that while current knowledge professionals may largely manage and adapt to change, there is a growing number of students who are interested in pushing beyond that role to generate change within the corporate environment. This is precisely the kind of impetus necessary to create a knowledge culture, and the school is actively seeking out these potential change agents. Finding people who want to keep their heads above the horizon, embrace the next new technologies, and lead the charge is one thing, but developing the ability to lead an organization in a new direction is an even greater challenge. The school recognizes that it needs to impart the organizational and technical awareness necessary to identify opportunities for innovation, and to develop the students' ability to effectively articulate the goals of a directional shift and lead that change, without being perceived as a nuisance by the corporation.

In our conversations, Nancy observed that in talking to students about leadership, she must differentiate between the roles of the leader and the manager – an instance in which it is desirable to uncouple one concept from the other, rather than connect them! No matter how interested students

may be in producing change, they are frequently reluctant to assume a managerial, or even leadership, positions. Since they don't always recognize what makes a leader and thus confuse leadership with management, they may try to avoid both. This hesitation may be the result of a generational wariness of being identified as an "authority figure," or it might simply be an unwillingness to direct the actions of others.

Part of Nancy Gershenfeld's leadership development process is to help students realize that a leader is not necessarily the president of a student organization or the CEO of a company. She emphasizes that leaders are the ones who see a problem or a requirement, devise a solution, and obtain a good outcome. Nancy and other faculty members work hard to instill the notion that a leader is the person whom others seek out for advice or for assistance, or the one who is a spokesperson for a group or is able to organize a part of a project. Thus, they do not need to self-identify as a leader, but come naturally to the position through the actions and the actions of their colleagues.

In the collaborative environment, there is also the phenomenon of "serial leadership" in which leadership will shift as the project progresses, according to individual skills and aptitudes. (One of my favorites among the various kinds of leadership roles is the "border collie" – the team member who rounds up all the efforts of the other members and makes sure that they're heading in the same direction.) Once the students become aware of the many different shapes that leadership can assume, they're more apt to seek out those roles that suit their own abilities and interests.

In spite of a student's tepid reaction to the idea of participating in management, they still need to hone their awareness of the corporate culture and the principles of administration – thus the library management classes Nancy teaches. To this end, one of the first things she emphasizes is the importance of identifying and understanding both the informal and formal lines of the corporate structure. I think that we can agree that, no matter how large a part knowledge leadership plays in the organization, the information/knowledge sector will generally be a part of a greater organization. In order to accomplish the change, to create the most effective knowledge culture, and to provide the maximum strategic benefit to the organization, the knowledge practitioners need to be aligned with the culture and the landscape of the corporate whole. With organizational configuration blurring as responsibilities merge and divide, it is increasingly important for the knowledge professional to maintain awareness of the "shadow" structure (here we again see the importance of connections), in order to identify champions, key players, and — yes — barriers that influence or hinder the development of the knowledge culture.

In her work, Nancy Gershenfeld has observed an increasing trend to move away from vertical stovepipes, to dynamically group employees on a project basis. While there are still unit managers for administrative purposes, the project-based cross-organizational team is becoming the norm in many organizations, presenting an ideal opportunity for the knowledge thought leader to make necessary connections among these groups and to create effective knowledge sharing strategies. It's also a culture in which today's iSchool graduates should thrive. While there will always be positions in which the more traditionally oriented will feel comfortable, there is also an expanding range of new opportunities for practitioners who see the value of emerging paradigms and technologies and are willing to be knowledge leaders, change agents, and strategic organizational assets.

Emerging from our conversation is a picture of the new knowledge service model designed to support and foster the new corporate knowledge culture. It is proactive, an integral part of the corporate structure, aligned with the organization's strategic goals, and an active participant in the realization of those goals. Most important, its practitioners are prepared and willing to be knowledge thought leaders as well as change agents within the corporate structure. The Information Schools and teachers like

Nancy Gershenfeld and her peers are meeting the challenge of educating the new generation of knowledge workers, knowledge professionals who will bring about the changes necessary for creating the knowledge culture. They are constructing a curriculum based on awareness of the abilities and talents necessary for success, identifying and cultivating the next generation of leaders for our dynamic profession.

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