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## Building and Sustaining the Knowledge Culture: Susan Fifer Canby Puts Theory into Practice at the National Geographic Society

by Guy St. Clair



The development and sharing of intellectual capital is now a given for any successful organization. Indeed, an enterprise-wide knowledge culture supported through an effective and well-implemented knowledge management (KM) and knowledge services structure is routinely described as highly desirable in any modern, well-managed organization.

In the knowledge culture, all persons affiliated with the organization understand and accept their responsibilities for knowledge development and knowledge sharing (now generally characterized with the “KD/KS” acronym), and at the [National Geographic Society](#) in Washington, DC the organizational knowledge culture is much in evidence. This iconic scientific and publishing institution could well be said to epitomize the concept of the knowledge culture, and much of that success has had to do with the leadership of Susan Fifer Canby, the society’s enthusiastic and talented Vice-President for Libraries and Information Services. With management and service delivery responsibility for ensuring that KD/KS is practiced at the highest levels of excellence, Fifer Canby’s success in this work is well known and serves as a model for many in the KM/knowledge services field.

While the challenges of leading such an endeavor might seem daunting to some information and knowledge professionals, Fifer Canby deals with the National Geographic Society’s intellectual capital from an eminently practical perspective. Giving credit where credit is due, we recognize that the seemingly ubiquitous academic attention to KM provides important theoretical background for managing intellectual capital, but if we want to see results, to demonstrate that KM affects organizational success, we have to identify what will work in each particular environment and then put it in place. This is exactly what Fifer Canby has done throughout her career at the National Geographic Society, and the organization’s established knowledge culture clearly demonstrates the success of the NGS/Fifer Canby paradigm. By focusing on the practical with the integration of knowledge services – the management methodology that converges information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning – Fifer Canby and her staff have successfully established an environment in which intellectual capital is clearly recognized as the asset it is. If “putting KM to work” is the value statement that motivates most knowledge professionals, it truly falls into place at the Geographic.

So just how well is KM “put to work” at NGS?

“We have an influential role at the Society,” Fifer Canby says, and she tells a good story about how that influence comes into play.

“I think one of the most critical elements of the whole KM/knowledge services picture is to apply KM to leadership,” she says, “and that is what we do. I learned this early on, for after my first few years as a manager it became clear to me that leadership and librarians must be inexorably linked if libraries are to serve their organizations effectively. Librarians need not only to be able to make the case for libraries but to influence organizations in the areas of information, knowledge sharing, and building culture. While I was the library director, it was my role to speak for the Society’s library, but I realized I couldn’t do it alone. We needed to develop other voices who could choose different venues where they could speak and be heard with different levels of staff, at the cafeteria table, in the hall, at a divisional liaison meeting, in a teaching moment, at the reference desk.”

“So early on, I encouraged library staff to take on assignments (marketing, user training, weeding the collections, building out a women’s wiki, liaison coordination, etc.) that would require them to work across divisions of the library, to learn what it takes to build a cohort, how to persuade people to spend their time doing what you want to see get done, how to run a meeting, etc. As time went on, it meant encouraging people not to wait for an assignment but to look for an opportunity in the white space, to work across the library’s units, to work with staff hierarchically above and below them, to learn to build teams. It meant getting everyone involved in leading and participating in teams.”

But leadership isn’t limited to the workplace.

“Not at all,” Fifer Canby says. “At the same time I encourage my staff to participate professionally – not just to join SLA, ARMA, etc., but to do their part – to volunteer to lead a committee, take minutes, give a presentation, write an article. Since there was very little money in our budget for conferences and meetings, my staff got used to ‘earning their way’ to these meetings, with my supporting them with administrative leave and advising them about opportunities. As a result, at annual report time all staff are expected to document how they contribute to the library, to the Society, to our profession, and to their communities. I think they understand that leadership is an important factor in promotions and recognition, and leadership can be expressed in many ways.”

Susan Fifer Canby herself is a remarkable example of this leadership sharing philosophy, serving as a museum volunteer and in a variety of other extracurricular engagements. In the professional realm, Fifer Canby has been long active in the Special Libraries Association (SLA), the international organization representing the interests of some 11,000 information professionals in over eighty countries. For SLA, Fifer Canby has taken her KD/KS and leadership skills far beyond her own workplace, serving on SLA’s Professional Development Advisory Council, chairing its Publications Committee, and serving as President of SLA’s Washington, DC Chapter (the association’s largest). She is currently a member of the association’s Board of Directors, using her management and advisory expertise in collaboration with SLA leadership as the organization grapples with strategy development in difficult economic times. For Fifer Canby, understanding the influence of KM/knowledge services and the value of KD/KS in the larger environment – even if it is for one’s own professional association – is critical and not to be dismissed lightly.

At the National Geographic Society, looking at the influential role of KM/knowledge services becomes very specific when strategic learning comes into the picture. Now recognized as one of the three “building blocks” of knowledge services, strategic learning is generally thought of as any interaction in the workplace which enables both those learning and those sharing their knowledge to contribute to the success of the organizational mission. Certainly that is the case at the National Geographic, and together with the development of more formal learning activities, KM’s influential role in the management of intellectual capital is now well established. At the Society, it was Fifer Canby and her leadership that enabled the development of the organizational learning structure, beginning more than 30 years ago when she introduced and integrated online searching at the

Geographic. She followed this up with a training program for editorial, business, and Web research, chairing a cross-divisional team that built the Society's first intranet.

After that, the continuum seemed to just fall into place and it's a story Fifer Canby likes to tell because the connection between strategic learning and NG [Library and Information Services](#) (LIS), Fifer Canby's functional unit, was a natural – and ultimately very successful – fit.

“In 2003, I had the opportunity to help to set up National Geographic Learning Systems (NGLS), working closely with my colleagues in Corporate Services under the leadership of our Chief Financial Officer, Chris Liedel. Incorporating advice from the Senior Vice President of HR, Liedel formed an executive team to work with a consultant to challenge the rest of my colleagues and me to translate our knowledge into learning for the organization. He wanted to develop these sessions into core learning for all staff, and employees who took all the sessions earned an NGS flag and a certificate and were recognized at the CFO's quarterly all staff meetings.”

So with that support from Liedel and other senior management staff, NGLS got underway, resulting in a strategic learning function that benefits all employees. And, not so incidentally, providing another happy result, the identification and participation of a sponsor for LIS and its work. During the NGLS development process, Liedel became better acquainted with the work that librarians do, and – as important as anything else – he learned what their potential contribution for the larger organization can be. So for Liedel it became clear what the LIS role at National Geographic is, and when asked on one occasion how LIS contributes to the larger organization, his response was direct and to the point: “The library is a change agent.”

Absolutely. And part of being a change agent for the larger organization involves looking beyond the usual products and services offered by the business unit and identifying opportunities for innovation. With LIS, working to create NGLS was the way to go, and not surprisingly, as time went on, LIS became the “owner” of NGLS, probably because of the training experience and organizational skills already in place in LIS.

Describing the process, Fifer Canby talks about how the LIS team “developed the technical, organizational, and pedagogical underpinnings.”

“We built the webpages,” she notes, “and we set up the metrics, integrated the sign-up tools, and we even were able to evolve one of our staff into a ‘learning librarian’ position to coordinate and encourage staff from all over the organization to share their skills. So we were able to engage such diverse instructors as a lawyer to teach negotiation skills, another lawyer teaching rights clearance policies, a cartographer to teach how to use maps, a proofreader teaching copyediting, the best Powerpoint presenter teaching Powerpoint. LIS of course taught a research series called “Total Research” and provided other learning experiences. We even converted part of our periodical room to a ‘learning lab’ where staff could hold their classes and make use of desktop computers. And it all fit because it was part of the organizational culture at the Society. Our President John Fahey likes to see things grow organically, based on the passion and energy of the staff, so rather than formalizing responsibility under more typical areas (e.g. limiting training to HR or intranet skills to Communications or IT), we moved ‘organically’ with NGLS, it was the right management model to use.”

Obviously. And as the story of the development of NGLS demonstrates, the secret of applying KM to influence at the larger enterprise level is not hard to uncover, certainly not at the National Geographic Society. In the knowledge culture, every KM/knowledge services initiative that succeeds does so because there is a knowledge thought leader. And that knowledge thought leader understands what goes on in that particular knowledge culture. He or she recognizes early on that the knowledge culture is an accumulation – among the people who make up the organization or the

enterprise – of shared beliefs and values about knowledge and the application of knowledge for organizational success. In the most successful cases, the knowledge thought leader is a knowledge services professional like Susan Fifer Canby, a senior employee with management responsibility for the delivery of knowledge services, a person who is also the explicit or *de facto* knowledge services *director* for the larger organization. And while technical knowledge is important, and professional expertise, and management skills, the truly successful knowledge thought leader understands that the job is to be a catalyst, to enable, as Dale Stanley has described, the creation of knowledge value by facilitating knowledge sharing, ensuring that opportunities are identified and taken advantage of.\*

So the KM/knowledge services effort at NGS matches one of the basic attributes of the knowledge culture, focusing on the larger organizational role and providing benefits enterprise-wide. Certainly that is what one learns in any conversation with Fifer Canby, as it soon becomes clear that the role of LIS is very definitely enterprise-wide. While traditional research and search services are performed – and performed very well, according to the many satisfied clients who make up the LIS user base – in an organization such as NGS services provided will go well beyond the traditional.

Of course Fifer Canby is proud of this work, and she likes describing how LIS has been successful in these efforts, but she is also willing to recognize when an idea or a change is not feasible.

“Ten years ago,” she says, “we experimented with federated search to reduce redundancies in scheduling the magazine’s stories and products, and to enable product developers to share content. It wasn’t a success. While we found it to be technically possible, people just weren’t willing to share, and what they did share was so inconsistent as not to be useful. So we abandoned that effort and moved on, since there was so much else that we could do.”

Moving forward, LIS not surprisingly soon found another KD/KS issue to tackle, this one having to do with conference attendance. At the Geographic – as would be expected in any large scientific and publishing organization – the number of conferences attended by staff can be huge and hard to keep up with. As Fifer Canby puts it, “We realized that lots of people were attending conferences and not sharing the implications and impact with the rest of the organization or even in their own divisions. So we compiled a list and saw where there was overlap. Ahead of time we asked those people preparing to attend a conference to be prepared to share learning when they returned. We then persuaded the Executive Vice President of Communications to host the sessions, which might be a panel discussion or a presentation by an individual, and we invited the staff to attend programs we called ‘TrendWatch.’ The effort was so successful we eventually expanded the programming of TrendWatch to include outside speakers from organizations like Google, Pew and others, to share trends with NGS employees.”

Another cross-division type of service – related to the “TrendWatch” programs – is the Trends Analysis Team, also chaired by Director of Business and Editorial Research Barbara Ferry. The team, whose members are recruited from throughout the organization, tracks trends that might affect NGS and its mission and every quarter reports on these to the organization.

And, as it turns out, the LIS success with integrating much of its work with other business units has brought about a repeat performance (or perhaps “a second chance” would be a better way to describe it).

“In the past three years,” Fifer Canby says, “we have circled back to the issue of editorial scheduling and broadened it to include all calendars at the Geographic. Working closely with IT, we developed

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\* Stanley himself is readily characterized as a knowledge thought leader, serving as Director, Literature Services at Gilead Sciences, Foster City, CA and sharing his professional expertise with colleagues in the field as a co-facilitator for SLA’s Click U [Certificate Program in KM/Knowledge Services](#).

a Future Events database, to enable staff to maintain and track editorial calendars that would enable them to see their editorial schedules independently and also in context with other editorial schedules, with the emphasis on being able to search by subject, contributors, dates, locations, and particularly to be able to identify important or timely publications/shows, etc. Designed to enable all staff to coordinate across divisions with advertisers, promotions, grants staff, and many more, we use intern assistance, with LIS staff adding key anniversaries and other dates that NGS might want to use as editorial cues.”

Yet it is important, as Fifer Canby recognizes, to understand that success in KM/knowledge services does not always come easily.

“This effort,” she says, “has been an arduous process, with the usual struggles and potential barriers – getting buy-in from IT, getting funding, getting staff to actually input the data in this new tool, learning to use the tool, working with applications development people offshore, having to change developers. Finally, though, it seems to be coming together and I think we are in the home stretch. But it doesn’t come without a price, and we’ve had to learn that tenacity, the ability to work with others, the ability to see when the window of opportunity cracks even a little, these are the skills that are necessary if we are going to succeed in collaborating.”

So collaboration – another recognized characteristic of the knowledge culture – comes into play at the National Geographic?

“Of course,” Fifer Canby says. “And there are any number of examples. One is a group I led for several years. Called the ‘Think Tank,’ we provide a cross-divisional forum for colleagues to introduce, incubate, and hand off ideas and new business opportunities. This may involve providing market research, developing a business plan, and developing an owner. Whatever we do, though, for the group to succeed, we must get the right people to the table to explore an idea that crosses divisional boundaries. From there we develop the cohort, the goals, clarify assets, develop a prototype, identify the audience, etc. And we’ve wrestled with a variety of topics: introducing enterprise iPod programming, developing protocols for domain names, improving the customer service web pages that had no owner but many stakeholders, that sort of thing.”

And of course another attribute of the knowledge culture – and right up there with the willingness to collaborate – is an enthusiasm for information technology and communication in the KD/KS process, and certainly that feature is in place at the National Geographic. Fifer Canby is clear about her own enthusiasm for the potential of new technologies, and she and her team have consistently seen themselves as early adopters.

“Five years ago,” she says, “we began working with Web 2.0 networking tools – building a LIS Wiki to capture and share project work, to create depositories for content, and to find new tools for raising our level of service delivery. We needed LIS staff to understand how to use the 2.0 tools in order to guide our organization to use RSS, podcasting, messaging, wikis, all of which are part of our infrastructure today. As we got more comfortable with the tools, LIS staff became advocates, working in cross-divisional teams. Karen Huffman, for example, who was then our intranet webmaster, became LIS’s main spokesperson and proponent of these tools and she did so well that she was eventually recruited by IT to join their team, to work with IT in developing 2.0 more broadly in the organization. Before transferring out of LIS she and others helped our international partners, collectors, and sales staff develop and apply wikis. We added RSS to our intranet and to various sites within it. Now we are lobbying our IT department to adopt a wiki tool that they will support, as our interest continues to be more in how to make the most of the tools to share knowledge, rather than the technology *per se*. If models are created and become popular, we find that this is a way to help technology become institutionalized, a goal we all share.”

Naturally, not all knowledge development and knowledge sharing at the National Geographic is about databases or professional organizations, and Fifer Canby makes it clear that these activities – regardless of their origin – are as critical to organizational success as any others the LIS team undertakes.

“As an example,” she says, “when the occasion arose archivist Mark Jenkins chose to exert leadership by playing to his strength, synthesizing the history of the Geographic in 2008 when the Society celebrated 120 years. Jenkins wrote a ‘Making a Difference’ series for the NGs intranet, profiling a moment in our history when Society contributions proved pivotal in science, exploration, and the diffusion of geographic knowledge. This series was picked up by our international partners and published as front matter in the international editions of 33 local language editions of *National Geographic* and used to create interstitial program pieces for the National Geographic Channel. Along those same lines, Manager of Records and Archives Renee Braden interprets our business records and heritage collections everyday to support product development, ensuring our stamp, postcard, rare books, women explorers’ wiki, etc. inspire the Society’s artwork and products. And with a completely different focus, another LIS staff member, Systems Manager Ellie Briscoe, has taught CPR to more than 100 NGS colleagues, including the guard force, library staff, and many others, because of her personal passion for the subject. So there are many ways LIS influences the organization, and it is through our collaboration, knowledge development and knowledge sharing, and our strategic learning efforts that we support the Geographic’s mission.”

Influencing the organization. KD/KS. Strategic learning.

The knowledge culture is working at the National Geographic Society and perhaps that knowledge culture is a sign of what’s coming. Perhaps it’s a new day for people who work with information and knowledge. Perhaps it’s the dawn of a new era, a “golden age” of knowledge development and knowledge sharing in a “new” society? While some will assert that the much-discussed “information age” will be with us for a long time to come (and they are probably right about that), might we also be seeing signs that a new “knowledge age” is taking hold?

When we look at organizations like the National Geographic Society and the knowledge leadership provided there, knowledge leadership that supports the Geographic as a knowledge culture, it becomes very clear that there is a very real place for KM/knowledge services in our society. Even when times are difficult – as these days definitely are – Susan Fifer Canby, the NG LIS staff, and all their colleagues throughout the Society are pointing us to a very bright knowledge future.

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