

FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

SLA: AN ESSAY ON THE KNOWLEDGE CULTURE

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Today's information professionals are the product of one hundred years of attention to the information, knowledge, and strategic learning needs of the people for whom they provide professional services. As SLA members, these information professionals are now positioned to provide leadership in what is destined to be a new age of knowledge development, knowledge sharing, and knowledge value in the global society. All of us—sooner rather than later—are going to come to recognize the critical role of knowledge in the successful achievement of human and societal goals. What is happening, in a very real sense, is the development of a knowledge culture.

How do we define the knowledge culture? We know that the general concept of “culture” has to do with shared beliefs and values, and we also know that culture in a different sense connects to a level of sophistication, learning, or education about a particular subject or frame of reference. So it is with the knowledge culture. It is an accumulation of shared beliefs and values about what constitutes knowledge and the role of knowledge in society. For information professionals (or knowledge services professionals, specialist librarians, knowledge workers, or whatever they are called in the workplace and in society to designate them for their professional skills and competencies), those beliefs and values build on and connect with an understanding of the organization of information, knowledge, and strategic learning, and how those disciplines converge for the benefit of an organization, a group, a community, or a society.

As for the specifics, there is a collection of attributes that one can expect to experience when a knowledge culture is built, regardless of the structure of the entity that will benefit from its growth and development. The attributes of the knowledge culture are well known to those connected with SLA. In whatever enterprise the culture is built, there is an expressed willingness to collaborate, and the value of collaboration is understood by all people affiliated with the enterprise. Resistance to collaboration is minimal, often to the point that there is no resistance. In the knowledge culture, collaboration is a given, and all managers, staff, customers, suppliers and vendors, and other stakeholders recognize that without collaboration, success will be elusive.

The organization that has built a knowledge culture displays a respect for and supports the integrity of the knowledge process, in an environment that incorporates the highest moral and professional standards of service delivery. In a knowledge culture, that integrity connects with a workplace ambiance that expects and supports transparency (except in clearly defined situations requiring the highest levels of proprietary discretion or security), honesty, and trust in all interactions between individuals and groups. In their dealings with others, those who contribute to and participate in the knowledge culture understand that as knowledge development and knowledge sharing evolve and are implemented for the greater good, their own role is enhanced and strengthened.* Another attribute of the knowledge culture is that in the workplace, the seeking, capture, and utilization of information, knowledge, and strategic learning are carried out with a focus on the larger organizational role and the benefits for the larger organization, not on the individuals (or departments) involved in the transaction, and it is recognized that the particular knowledge transfer affects the successful achievement of organizational success. As a result, the knowledge worker's professional allegiance—as has been recognized and understood for a generation in specialized librarianship and is now similarly understood as a characteristic of the knowledge culture—rests with the organization or enterprise of which the individual is a part. Allegiance to an external influence, such as a profession or a school of thought or a political, religious, or social philosophy, is secondary. These other influences naturally have some bearing on the knowledge worker's thinking. Indeed, in some cases this can be a matter of some delicacy as the knowledge worker seeks to resolve the tension so that both his or her primary professional allegiance and the secondary influences can exist in harmony. Generally speaking, though, when the organization is founded on and supported by a knowledge culture, these other influences do not overrun and/or interfere with the workings or the successful achievement of the larger enterprise mission.

Integral to the success of the knowledge culture is an acknowledgement of and an enthusiasm for the role of information technology and communication in the knowledge development and knowledge sharing process. It is easy to talk about the importance of the relationship between technology and knowledge and provide all assembled with the warm glow of "that's right." It is another thing, though, to misinterpret the heights of success that are enabled through a clear understanding of the value of IT and communication in that process. Society has never before been able to experience the end results that are now made possible through the implementation of good IT management, and the development

* Thus recognizing that all elements of the knowledge culture are not *necessarily* altruistic but in the larger scheme of things do eventually support an unselfish rather than a self-interested outcome.

of communication skills—for even the most innocuous of activities—is basic to succeeding in any of those activities. In the knowledge culture, IT and communication are not taken for granted. They are recognized for their value, and much effort is put forward (often unconsciously) in seeking to enhance interactions with IT and in the development and strengthening of communication skills.

Another attribute of the knowledge culture is respect for and probably even some enthusiasm for the process that enables knowledge services. Similarly, there is respect for the intellectual foundation that supports excellence in the management of information, knowledge, and strategic learning within the larger organization or environment. The intellectual quest is not disdained, even when it is not referred to as such (and in many non-academic and “real-world” environments it is not). Knowledge development and knowledge sharing—the interactions of the collaborative process—are recognized as interactions that benefit the larger organization. Indeed, in the organization that has built its enterprise framework on its knowledge culture, the development and sharing of intellectual capital is considered an organizational asset.

On that subject and with respect to the management of the organization’s intellectual capital, knowledge management is recognized as essential and critical. When combined and converged with information management and strategic learning into knowledge services, knowledge management provides the very foundation for the development and sharing of knowledge for organizational success. In fact, it might be said (altering a little SLA’s famous motto) that knowledge services is putting knowledge management to work, the practical side of knowledge management. * As such, knowledge services is not in and of itself an end result. Knowledge services is the vehicle, the mechanism that permits the successful achievement of the knowledge culture and as such enables organizational strength. The convergence of and excellence in the management of information, knowledge, and strategic learning are naturally required, of course, but not because organizational endeavors will fail if they are ignored. They will not necessarily fail, but they will not be realized as well as they could be realized. Knowledge services is required because as a management methodology—a framework for service delivery—knowledge services enables and certifies the elements that support and lead to the knowledge culture.

For SLA’s members, the idea of a knowledge culture refers to an environment and a way of

* It was SLA member Dale Stanley who recognized this connection, further explored in an article written with the present author, “The Knowledge Management/Knowledge Service Continuum: From the Theoretical to the Practical,” published in *Information Outlook* in January, 2008.

thinking about the management of information, knowledge, and learning in which we seek to expand our intellectual and service-focused capabilities beyond the immediate workplace into a larger environment or service sphere. It is almost as if we took the special libraries concept that John Cotton Dana and the founders of SLA brought to the profession and spread it from the specialized library (or whatever that information, knowledge, and learning delivery function in the organization is now called) out into the larger workplace and into the wider societal framework. These early knowledge services professionals understood that their work was indispensable to the organizations for which they provided library services, and they understood that it was through the successful delivery of those services that their users and clients would accomplish the organizational mission.

Today's SLA members—and particularly those who will come after us—can do the same, but the context is different. Today's SLA members have the opportunity, the intellectual background, the organizational framework, and their common strengths to use their skills and competencies for leading their organizations into building a knowledge culture. In doing so, they can ensure the organization's mission success. It is an opportunity whose time has come, for both the organizational workplace and the larger society that need those competencies. It might even be thought of as our destiny, as the development of a knowledge culture (regardless of the environment or organizational structure in which it might be developed) can specifically evolve from the experiences, intellectual strengths, and service perspective of those who make up SLA's membership.

Whether we are speaking locally or globally, all of us are aware that society requires attention to knowledge, not only to how knowledge is developed and shared but, more important, to how it is used once it has been developed and shared. The knowledge culture we speak about is being developed with the realization that the success of every interaction rests squarely on the quality of the knowledge developed and shared in pursuit of whatever goal is being sought. Whatever the situation, this development is demonstrated daily in the workplace, in citizens' personal lives, in organizations, in governments, and in all interactions in which the transfer of information, knowledge, and learning lead to a conclusion of one kind or another. Society cannot without serious compromise continue to grow, expand, and evaluate its success without attention to the quality of the knowledge that supports society's development. The acceptance of the commonly expressed and much-lamented (in intellectual circles) "good enough" will ensure the status quo, of course, but to advance, to move forward, and to be more than it is, society must strive for a higher level of support, support that evolves from and depends upon the highest standards of excellence in knowledge services delivery. The knowledge culture—one that is successful and will be useful in enabling success—comes from and builds on the efforts of all knowledge workers at all levels and succeeds only when all knowledge workers understand the importance of seeking those highest standards of excellence.

Those working as information professionals have prepared themselves for providing knowledge services. That preparation is described often throughout this history and connects, either specifically or implicitly, to the service delivery accomplishments of specialist librarians. These knowledge workers can, if they choose to accept their destiny, use their skills, their expertise, their competencies, and their professional service commitment not only to lead society in its recognition of the role of knowledge in human and societal achievement, but to lead in its implementation as well. Whether educated as librarians or not, by partnering with their clients in business, science, law, health sciences, the arts, government, and all forms of subject development in which the support of research, contextual decision-making, and innovation is required, the specialist librarian (however defined) is singularly qualified to provide this leadership. No other information, knowledge, or strategic learning professional has the education, service philosophy, intellectual force, and historical legacy to match that of the specialist librarian, today's information professional.

Why is this so? Because these professional knowledge workers simply perform the duties of a recognized and essential function, the provision of knowledge services (again, however defined) that is required in their parent organizations, the organizations that employ them and have them as part of the enterprise team *because* of their skills and their competencies. These people come from a tradition in which excellence was required "or else," and it is well understood that for people working in specialized libraries during the past century, there was no option to provide service delivery that was simply good enough. In some specialized libraries, it might have been possible to refer the user to the artifact or pipeline that contained the information being sought.

Perhaps, but highly unlikely, considering the level of expectation that organizational management and particularly expectations of the clientele who made up the service sphere of specialist librarians. For decades now service delivery in the specialized library has put the information professional's job on the line. Either the information was provided or it was not. In business, research, and science, the information must be provided and it must be exactly the information (or knowledge or strategic learning) that the specific client was seeking. Furthermore, with the coming of electronic information delivery and the ease with which the user could find the "easy" answers for himself or herself, the role of the information professional became even more demanding, for the user now came to the specialist librarian seeking higher value services (and certainly had no interest in being directed to a resource where the information might be found). That user wanted the solution, not a guide to the solution. So today's knowledge services professionals have to be good at what they do. In being good at their work, they are thus positioned to work within their parent organizations and in the larger society in affecting the move toward the knowledge culture.

At the beginning of its new century, SLA is strong, and specialist librarians have now arrived at the critical juncture of their ambition, if—as a professional discipline—they choose to embrace this splendid opportunity as their destiny and their responsibility. Today’s organizational leaders recognize the need (if not always agreeing with knowledge professionals about the value) of excellence in information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning in the workplace, and particularly in the need for excellence in knowledge services delivery in the achievement of organizational success. With their unique qualifications and intellectual gifts, specialist librarians and information professionals can move their branch of the profession forward, into a role in which they and their professional leadership can enable a knowledge culture for the organization.

To do so, though, to lead the way in building the knowledge culture, specialist librarians must be willing to make some choices. They must choose one of two directions for themselves and their professional role in their organizations. They must decide whether they will be librarians of the past or knowledge services professionals of the future. They cannot be both. The time has come, thanks to the opportunities that are in front of them, for specialist librarianship to engage in perhaps its own version of Schumpeter’s famous “creative destruction” (although, hopefully, not quite so drastic a destruction as that concept often invokes!).

Perhaps SLA as an organization—its members and its leadership—should recognize that it is time to give up the old ways of doing things and replace them with the new. Perhaps now is the time—since the process has already begun, as described in the final chapter of this history—to reconceptualize the organization and transform SLA and its service delivery model. And in doing so, not so incidentally, to reconceptualize and transform the service delivery model of all its members and other stakeholders.

Perhaps what is needed is a version of radical innovation that while it moves away from what has gone before, leads to a new and better operational and management framework for service delivery for the future. Indeed, perhaps it is time for specialist librarians to take up for themselves and their branch of the profession the role that industry, science, government, and all other service spheres are waiting for: knowledge services leadership that converges the results of excellence in information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning into the knowledge culture that these service spheres require. It is SLA’s members who are qualified and prepared to do this work.

The demands are not only being made in the organizational arena. In this new age of knowledge development, knowledge sharing, and knowledge value, the larger global society is demanding knowledge leadership. Here again, SLA’s members are particularly well positioned to provide that standard of leadership if they will but acknowledge that they

possess the qualifications to do so. We see this when we connect the characteristics and requirements of the knowledge culture with the philosophical and service-delivery attributes of, first, specialized librarianship as it evolved over the last 100 years, and then with knowledge services as defined in the waning years of the last century and developed for service to society in this first decade of the new century. Within the organizations where they are employed, information professionals understand knowledge because they deal with knowledge all the time. They know how to work with knowledge, and that phrase—“working with knowledge”—could very appropriately become SLA’s new motto in its new century.

Why so? Because in the past, putting knowledge to work (or, in its connection with knowledge services, putting knowledge management to work) was indeed the driver that led intelligent and educated knowledge workers to enter into careers where they could *assist* in the process, where they could help others put knowledge (or knowledge management) to work. In SLA’s new century, that picture is very different. According to one of the association’s leading members, despite the many and disparate definitions for knowledge management, that activity is really *working with knowledge*, and that is what we do now. Today’s SLA member, making an important and worthwhile contribution to the achievement of the organizational mission, is not only helping someone else. He or she is engaging in a knowledge development and knowledge sharing experience, actively participating in the knowledge process and contributing importantly to the success of that effort. And, yes, there continue to be exceptions in those organizations that are not yet as enlightened or as prepared for the advantages of a knowledge culture as they might be. Nevertheless, as this branch of the library and information science profession is reconceptualized and transformed, what the SLA member does today is, by and large, nearer to the work of the knowledge services professional of the future than to that of the specialized librarian of the past.

So at this juncture in SLA’s history—at this happy convergence of the future and the past—can the association as a conglomeration of knowledge services professionals be the genesis of a knowledge leadership profession, the prototype and the inspiration for building the knowledge culture in its members’ parent organizations and in society? Certainly so. There is a special and particular role for SLA’s members as society moves to a larger knowledge culture and requires professional guidance and leadership, both within the particular organizations in which they are employed in their own countries and through their participation in SLA as a global intellectual and professional framework. Significantly, it is a role in which the very attributes of specialized librarianship of the past century and of knowledge services in the future can take SLA’s members beyond the workplace, from the local to the global.

As experts in the delivery of knowledge services, the association's members—its present members and its future members—have the knowledge, background, and skills for building the knowledge culture. Could there be any better end result for the association's first one hundred years?