

Nerida Hart at Australia's FaCSIA: "Libraries Aren't About Books – Libraries Are About People"

Some library managers do not seem very comfortable with the concept of knowledge management, but Nerida Hart isn't one of them. Hart, who is Director of Knowledge and Information Services at the Australian Government's Department of Families, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA), has a very good understanding of the role of libraries in the organizations where they support the research process. For her, it is the knowledge services function that pulls it all together.

"Of course there's confusion," Hart says, "because information professionals have focused long and hard on the book, the journal article, the thing that contains the information, and that's what most people think libraries are – collections. But we know better, and when we think about what we do as knowledge services, we are enabled – as information professionals – to focus on the people, on the people who require our services and the people who provide them. Libraries aren't about books. Libraries are about people."

Hart's distinction makes a lot of sense. Critical, contextual decision-making and innovation, the very solutions that knowledge customers want, come about through collaboration, through working with people, hearing them out, identifying the best solutions for their needs, and by working within a management framework that not only encourages but demands people-to-people interactions.

It's the knowledge services version of library management, and it's exactly what Hart and her colleagues do in Canberra. With some 35,000 knowledge and research clients spread throughout the country, FaCSIA builds those goals into its strategic planning effort.

"We decided early on," Hart says, "to provide knowledge enhancing services which add value to client decision-making and client capability, and to enhancing skills and knowledge, both among our own staff and among our clients. And we decided to move away from the survival model – so common in government organizations – to an innovation model, combining a holistic view of what we do with a continuous evaluation process."

That level of innovation support and continuous evaluation has created, Hart is happy to report, a very successful knowledge services operation, primarily because at FaCSIA, Knowledge and Information Services takes itself seriously. In fact, its role is so clearly defined that there is an established and well-articulated philosophy of service delivery, one that matches the department's consultancy, collaborative CRM focus with a high level of service. At K&IS (as the function is referred to), the service delivery model is based on consultation and knowledge sharing, leading to innovation and increased business capability and building on a service philosophy that has two component parts, the operation's knowledge strategies and what Hart calls the organization's "people strategies" (and it is no surprise to anyone who knows her that the emphasis is on the latter for Hart).

As a first step, the very concept of recognizing the role of knowledge in the research environment is built in to the operation, and knowledge strategies are established as fundamental elements of what the department is striving to achieve. In fact, knowledge is so fundamental to the department that the K-word is an integral piece of the K&IS vision, clearly included in the department's vision statement, to: "develop, sustain and promote the knowledge assets, knowledge capability, and knowledge investments of our clients and stakeholders."

It didn't happen overnight, of course, and it has been a growth process. In fact Hart is quick to assert – as she did recently when speaking at a professional conference – that moving successfully to a knowledge services environment can be a long-term project, as long as ten years in her case. It was worth it, though, and Nerida Hart happily describes how she could not have done it alone.

"We had our mentors," she says, "the people who influenced us in our development. Our knowledge strategies build around a number of important components, with the work of people like Karl Eric Sveiby

helping us understand the value of integrating tools and processes, Ross Dawson's work on the value of using trust and experience to build long-term and sustainable relationships, Dave Snowden on the value of knowledge elicitation for new knowledge and, equally important, his ideas about mentoring and coaching for knowledge transfer at all staff levels. These have been important drivers for us, and we're very aware that we needed them to help us apply our own goals and efforts to what is being done in the larger management arena."

Other knowledge strategies kick in as well, according to Hart. "We take very seriously things like promoting knowledge services as part of organizational strategy – and using the language of business outcomes to do so. This type of thing is an important element of the K&IS knowledge strategy, to doing what we do well for the benefit of the larger organization."

Then there are the K&IS people strategies, which include a number of unusual elements. Recruiting for attitude, for example, and not just for technical skills is obviously a key element for success in this knowledge services environment. Team development emphasizes that all staff are empowered to make a difference in the workplace, to contribute their individual strengths to the larger operational success, and a knowledge sharing mindset is a requirement for success on the job. Team building activities are a regular part of the management picture at K&IS, and consultancy skills are emphasized, in order to maintain sustainable relationships both with clients and all other stakeholders, including fellow staff members.

"We are also careful to recognize the value of mature workers," Hart points out. "We address knowledge retention through encouraging mature workers to return to the workplace, and the value of an intergenerational workforce is given a great deal of attention by, for example, asking more experienced staff to take on mentoring and coaching activities."

Which brings up the subject of strategic learning, that component of knowledge services that refers to anything that knowledge workers learn that helps them do a better job. At K&IS, building skills and knowledge through formal strategic learning programs is a given, with standardized performance agreements at each employee level, and formal learning plans for each team.

"It's part of what we do," Hart says, "of what I like to call 'people development.' It is critical to enabling us to do our work well. We actively seek to link skills development to organizational outcomes, we implement job rotation every 12 to 18 months, both for retention and skills development, and we engage in what we like to call 'stretching' exercises for all staff on an annual basis."

People development is not, of course, limited to K&IS staff. An important element of knowledge services is the training/strategic development of clients that comes with collaborative interaction, and it is a strength that Hart and her colleagues demonstrate time and time again. It is part of the package at K&IS, helping knowledge customers understand that the service your group is providing is one that helps them succeed.

"It's the value-add," Hart says. "What you need to do is to show how what you do supports what they do. You do it by observing how the clients are working, and then you show them how what we do, as knowledge services professionals, links to what they do. We've got the business intelligence for what they're working on, and we can lead them to it. And a by-product of that is a trusting, sustaining relationship that the knowledge customer can come to count on. We refer to our team members as 'librarians' – our salaried staff are all professional librarians – and the idea of the librarian as a trusted friend is an idea that resonates with customers. They need us, but they also have to know that we want to provide the services they require. We work hard to establish that relationship, and to keep it going once it is established."

So how does all this innovation support and continuous evaluation pay off? And where do the additional resources come from?

"First of all," Hart responds (and you can tell by the smile on her face that Hart is not shy about the success of the operation), "there are no 'extra' resources. What is accomplished is accomplished through building

the knowledge services philosophy into our practices. And, quite possibly, some of what we accomplish might be accomplished by something like, well, stealth. Remember, when we're talking about libraries and information centers and the like, the level of interest in what we do is virtually nil. Smart library managers are able to take the money and re-use it for practices that match the department's managerial philosophy. And by that I mean by the service philosophy that a well-chosen and committed staff is willing and able to implement. So, yes, perhaps some of it is done under the radar. Perhaps not 'stealth' exactly, but under the radar. That's what organizational trust and managerial leadership are all about."

And, yes, there are results, and this turn in the conversation brings on another smile.

"Productivity increases every year," Hart says, "and what we've learned is that if you structure the function so that all employees are part of the implementation plan and are empowered to serve as knowledge services professionals, the knowledge customers know where to come for their solutions. We're very proud of what happens with the staff. There's minimal staff turnover, and it's obvious that they are happy with their work. And, not to be dismissed lightly, our records indicate that 75% of the FaCSIA staff are regular clients, so K&IS is obviously meeting their knowledge needs. Statistics like that tell us that our business intelligence gathering and knowledge sharing are enhancing organizational knowledge, and there's much pride in that."

It is a pride well placed, and as the director of the department, Hart has been recognized for her contribution. She is modest about her accomplishments, making much reference to the group's team effort, but it is clear that she is the knowledge leader for the organization. Recently, she was designated the first SLA-ANZ Information Professional of the Year, given the award (sponsored by Dialog) at a meeting of the Australian Government Library and Information Network Conference. In presenting the award, Sue Henczel, President of SLA's ANZ Chapter, noted that Hart has done a remarkable job of "reinventing and developing her library's services to best meet her department's objectives, all while delivering exceptional services." Henczel characterized Hart as an information professional who has "embraced the possibilities of the knowledge management revolution to make sure that her library is not just a repository of information but also offers the tools and resources to help its users readily harness knowledge in their professional pursuits." It is a characterization that fits.