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Tony Saadat at EOS International: Passing On a Business Model to Knowledge Services Managers

Knowledge Development and Knowledge Sharing – what we’re referring to when we use the popular KD/KS acronym – is seldom more rewarding than when management practitioners pass their techniques along to clients. Tony Saadat is happy to do so, for Saadat strongly believes that listening to clients is the key to success in his business. This same client-service business model can be applied to the knowledge services function in many organizations.

Saadat is CEO at EOS International, where listening to the client has been a core component of the company’s service philosophy for many years. In Saadat’s opinion, there’s no reason why the same emphasis can’t work for all knowledge services managers, whether their responsibility is in specialized libraries, information centers, knowledge centers, or other information-delivery functions.

“All knowledge-based system vendors need to have a solid plan for actively soliciting client and industry feedback,” Saadat says. “The way knowledge workers access, use, and share information is key to the development of our future software platforms, and that same process can be applied to the development and sharing of knowledge in the special library.”

For Saadat and his colleagues at EOS International, it’s a model that works, and it can be applied to more than business management. Client feedback positions knowledge services managers to show internal management and client end-users how the implementation of the latest library technology can, as Saadat puts it, “enhance their visibility within their organization, provide better-decision making information to management, and significantly improve the organization’s bottom line.”

KD/KS isn’t only about library technology. For knowledge services managers, the entire spectrum of services, products, and consultations delivered through their unit provides a wide range of opportunities to hear what clients are asking for, and to design service delivery to match those needs. If knowledge services managers resist this technique – well established as a management tool – they are not doing themselves (or their organizations) any favors.

Specifics aren’t hard to come by, and Saadat is happy to describe some of what works for EOS International: active user groups (both virtual and face-to-face), on-going surveys and focus groups, executive summits, a formalized Marketing-Information-Program (MIP) that seeks to identify potential clients’ needs even before they are prospects, and, as important as anything else, a service philosophy that begins with asking clients, “How can we help you do your work?”

Is this client-service model successful?

“Absolutely,” Saadat says. “The library automation market is constantly changing, and while in the past there has been an emphasis on the development and marketing of tools, our approach now is to listen to the client and take into consideration how the end user will be using our solutions. And, most important, how easy it will be for them to access information and use that information as they turn it into knowledge for their day-to-day decision-making. These are critical issues for us.”

Which might explain why EOS International focuses its attention on specialized libraries. When asked what it is about special libraries (and the knowledge services professionals who work in them) that attracted him, Saadat is quick to respond.

“There are two points to make here,” he says. “First, I always like to see business-minded, entrepreneurial thinking in the people I do business with, and that’s exactly what the special libraries market is. Managing special libraries requires business sense, a business-oriented approach to service delivery, and that appeals to us as we develop our products. The second point has to do with the client point of view we’re talking about. Special librarians understand that their feedback is important, that what they have to say about how they and their clients use our products is important to building better products. Special librarians understand this and they know their opinions – as clients – count. So of course I like working with them.”

According to Saadat, it’s that kind of thinking that is behind the company’s “what-can-I-do-for-you?” approach.

“When I look around at the ILS market,” he says, “everyone gets distracted by all the features, features, features. Let’s get real. Clients don’t want to hear about features. They want to hear about how the solution will help them in their work. Vendors want to talk about the product, about the features available with the product, but they miss what’s more important. They forget to talk with the client about the client’s work.”

So talking with the client can pay dividends, even for knowledge services managers?

“Of course,” Saadat says. “Don’t worry about the features. Talk to the client. Find out what the client needs to do their work. Then fill that need.”

If Saadat’s remarks seem to characterize him as a man of some enthusiasm, that would be an exact reading. This is a leader who has a passion for client care, and it’s a characterization he himself is not shy about using. Indeed, when *San Diego Metropolitan Magazine* wrote about Saadat, after the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) selected him as the San Diego SBA Small Business Person of the Year for 2006, Saadat spoke quite frankly about this passion.

“I’m a listener,” he said. “I think listening to a client makes a big difference. At EOS, our philosophy is that our company is run by our clients.”

Listening comes naturally for Saadat. Being the son of an ambassador, Saadat makes a fine art of listening. He was born in Tehran, brought up and educated in the U.K. (where he took his undergraduate degree with honors from Birmingham University), and his graduate degree (in computer science) is Canadian (the University of British Columbia). For Saadat, listening is simply diplomacy in another guise. He just gives it a business slant, listening to what people need and then building businesses based on those needs (Saadat did this for three other companies before he came to EOS International). Again, it connects with the special libraries/knowledge services market.

“I’m really educated by special librarians and SLA,” he says. “When I’m with special librarians, like I am at the SLA Annual Conference, or at MLA or AALL, it’s in listening to clients that I learn not only about what’s needed for their work, but I learn about their work, about how they provide all those services and products for their own clients.”

Learning, of course, is the third element of the knowledge services model, whose other two components are information management and knowledge management. And it’s through learning that Tony Saadat gets excited about what’s happening with his clients, so the question has to be asked: with its success in developing and delivering products that enhance information management and knowledge management,– is strategic learning in EOS International’s future?

Saadat doesn’t hesitate.

“There is an emerging place in the library automation marketplace for strategic learning,” Saadat says. “Providing easy access to information and knowledge is the first step in the overall process. What the knowledge worker does with it and how they are able to share and collaborate with others will be the keys to their success. We’re always looking for ways to provide collaboration capabilities and we will continue to move in that direction. And that takes us back to the feedback. Our Client Advisory Council, for example, consists of many of what we might call ‘EOS power users,’ and these people are never shy about providing us with the thoughts and constructive feedback we need. So, yes, strategic learning is there. It’s built in and it’s simply part of what we do. We might not single it out as such, yet, but it’s there, and it will continue to be there.”

For Tony Saadat and the people at EOS International, it would appear that the commitment to knowledge services is serious business, and that providing products for the knowledge services marketplace – which of course includes specialized librarianship – is something that is given considerable attention.

“No question about it,” Saadat responds. “With respect to knowledge services, it’s a direction, and at EOS it’s a corporate direction we want to pursue. So we’re paying attention to it. Knowledge services is part of our strategic planning for the future. All companies and all vendors must move in this direction. When we speak about knowledge services supporting organizational decision-making and innovation, it’s not hard to predict the future of information delivery. More of that will be required. More innovation, more decision-making support. Knowledge services does that, and we plan to be right there, providing the services and products that information professionals and other knowledge workers need. It’s our vision for EOS and what we want to bring to the marketplace.”

Can that vision also be the vision for knowledge services delivery, for the knowledge workers who manage the operational functions that provide knowledge services? It can.