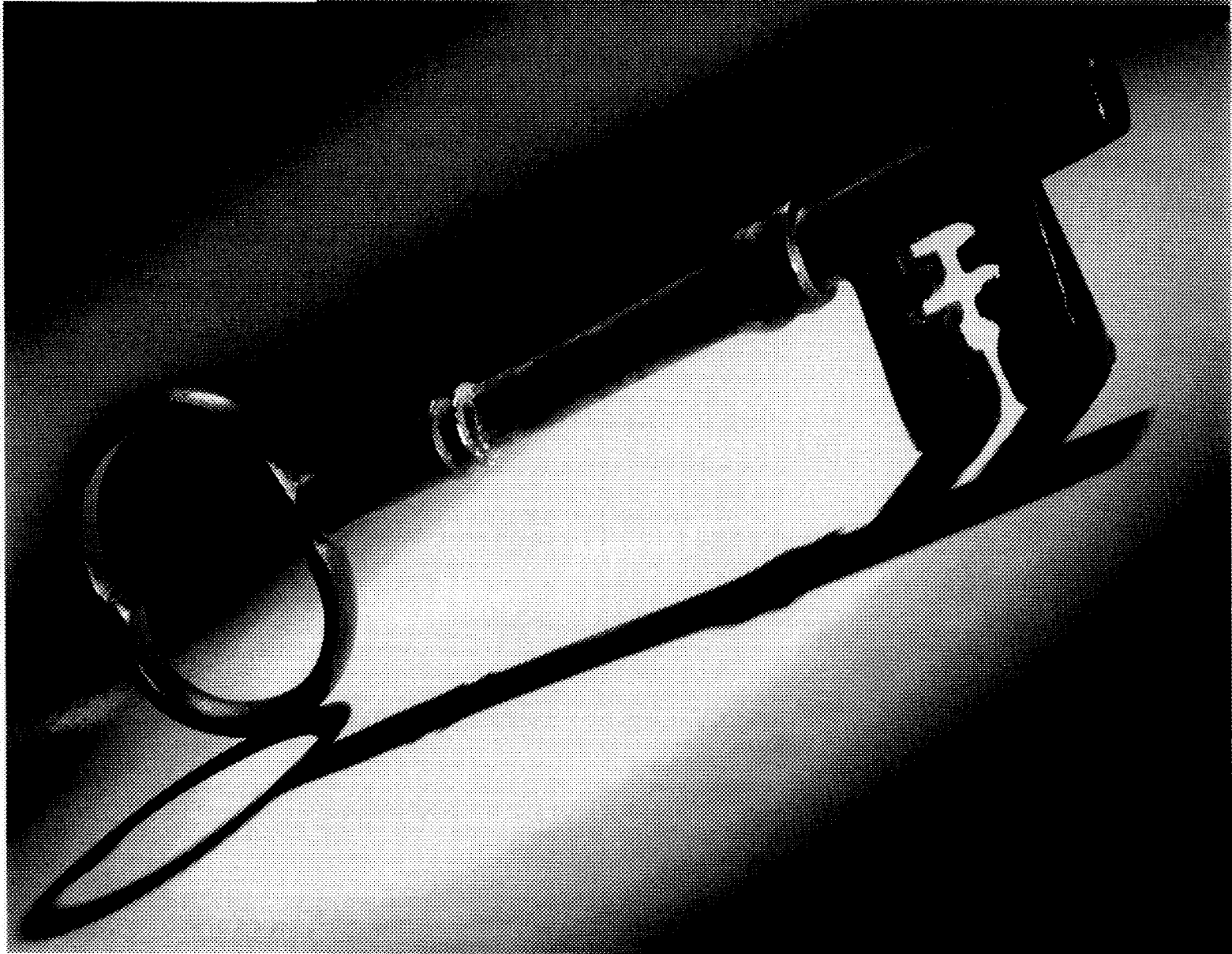


Knowledge Services: Your Company's Key to Performance Excellence



by Guy St. Clair

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••• Link Information Management, Knowledge Management, and Strategic (Performance-Centered) Learning for Maximum Return to the Organization

SLA MEMBERS ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE TERMS "INFORMATION MANAGEMENT," "knowledge management," and "strategic learning." Too often, however, these are seen as separate elements of the work that specialized librarians and information professionals do. In my opinion, it is now time to move beyond these specific terms to an overarching concept which includes them all. To function as effectively as possible, we must now think in terms of "Knowledge Services."

Knowledge Services is the term I use to identify successful information use in organizations. It enables companies (and their customers) to achieve performance excellence, both in the performance of their internal staff in achieving the corporate mission, and in the companies' interactions with external customers. As a management methodology, Knowledge Services links the aforementioned operational functions into an information-use "package" that pays off for all concerned. By bringing information management, knowledge management, and strategic (performance-centered) learning together into one coordinated function, overlapping benefits are realized and impediments to quality information use are minimized or, in an ideal situation, eliminated altogether.

It's not hard to see why. In the first place, in today's workplace, information is a critical resource, and no one nowadays would seriously argue that the management of information and information use is an unimportant or "fringe" activity in the modern corporation. We live and work in an information-intense environment.

What has happened, though, especially in the last few years, is that the workplace has moved from an *information-centric* workplace to a *knowledge-centric* one. No one is interested in information for its own sake anymore. What people want now is *knowledge*, and what we used to call the "information age" has become, in today's management environment, a "knowledge age." We now live and work in a time in which we not only seek information *qua* information, but we take that information and we codify it, analyze it, interpret it, and we *use* it to learn something new (and, ideally, we then *share* what we know with others who can use it). We have gone from seeking information to seeking knowledge.

Additionally, for most companies, a move toward Knowledge Services makes sense because its emphasis is on the information customer (whether internal or external). We

talk a great deal about "client relationship management" these days, but whether it's "customer service" or "CRM," Knowledge Services provides our customers with *better* information delivery. The customers have changed—they're not the same people who were seeking information from us even as recently as a decade ago—and as our users have changed, so have their perceptions and expectations about information and knowledge. If we're going to succeed in servicing them, we're going to have to recognize those changes, and adjust our approach and our programs to meet their new and different perceptions and expectations. Knowledge Services gives us the framework for doing that.

I define Knowledge Services as a management approach to the use of information in which *knowledge development* and *knowledge sharing* are basic to every transaction and every interaction that occurs. Moving to a Knowledge Services framework recognizes that the most critical asset in any group or environment is *what its people know*. At the same time, by incorporating Knowledge Services into the work that we do, we are given the opportunity to establish that what we have to offer our users and our customers is not just direction to the information. It is the information itself, in a context that relates to what the customer needs to do with the knowledge he or she will develop from that information.

This is a new role for specialist librarians and information professionals, and it is one we embrace enthusiastically. In fact, we take much pleasure in playing with the differences between "information" and "knowledge," and of course, being the good librarians that we are, we'll happily provide only the information if that's what our customer wants. But on the other hand, in most organizations where we are employed, simply finding "information" is much too expensive for the corporation. We're hired for our expertise, and what our employers want from us is knowledge, and the tools for developing knowledge.

And in this day and age, there really isn't much room for discussion for those who want to play the "knowledge vs. information" game. This debate seems to be an ongoing one, and the philosopher-intellectuals will argue for days on end about how information and knowledge are not the same thing. Of course they're not, but in today's management community, where we practice our profession and earn our living, the management of information has "migrated" to knowledge management, for lots of good reasons, as is delightfully described Brown and Duguid's *The Social Life of Information*. My pal Andrew Berner sums it up best, I think, when he refers to knowledge as "information that is used." It's in preparing the information for the *using* that knowledge is developed.

So without locking ourselves into discussions about whether we are dealing with *knowledge* or with *information*, we can accommodate a wide range of ideas and concepts. We do it by organizing information management, knowledge management, and strategic (performance-centered) learning into the three fundamental components of Knowledge Services. When we define those three components, it's easy to see how they all come together for the benefit of our companies and all the information stakeholders affiliated with it.

Information management is not difficult to define, for it's what librarians are good at. Specialist librarians, particularly, have been notably successful in working with scholars and engineers and theoreticians in designing information management programs and systems for the organizations where they are employed. For our purposes, information management is defined as the organizational methodology that is concerned with the acquisition, arrangement, storage, retrieval, and use of information to produce knowledge. It is the methodology that—in most cases—we have in place now. We work on it, we improve it, and we enhance it, but for all practical purposes, information management is our

methodology. It's there to work for us as we operate within the new information-intense, knowledge-centric environment.

But information management doesn't work all by itself, as we librarians are finally learning. Information management can't stand alone, not in a knowledge-centric company, for it must now include the management of

intellectual capital, or what we call "knowledge management," the second component of the Knowledge Services framework.

How do you define KM? It's difficult, simply because "knowledge management" means so many different things to so many different people. We can struggle toward a definition, though, by establishing what KM is *not*, and asserting at the outset that knowledge management is not information technology. Of course IT is the mechanism we use for organizing the elements of the knowledge management endeavor (that's why we call it "enabling technology"), but in the corporations

and organizations where we are employed, IT will not, in and of itself, lead to knowledge management.

But if KM is not information technology, what is it? A basic tenet of knowledge management, as we now understand it, is that it is about people. In fact, Laurence Prusak and Don Cohen have written a new book on "social capital" in organizations, and in discussing the book in a recent article in *The New York Times*, Fred Andrews commented that Prusak and Cohen belong to the "humanist wing" of KM. He then went on to describe (in yet another useful definition) how KM is now "taking hold" in many companies. "These companies," he writes, "have concluded that they possess an enormous but largely untapped asset in the wisdom accumulated by their workers over decades of experience." Knowledge management, as Andrews describes it, is the attempt to spread that wisdom throughout the company.

Knowledge Services is a management approach to the use of information in which *knowledge development* and *knowledge sharing* are basic to every transaction and every interaction that occurs.

Knowledge Services recognizes that the most *critical asset* in any group or environment is *what its people know*.

This knowledge—this *intellectual capital*—is the organization's primary competitive asset.

As a management methodology, Knowledge Services provides the tools for ensuring that this intellectual asset is captured, organized, analyzed, interpreted, and customized for maximum return to the organization.

Within the larger management community, we now recognize that KM is not a *product* or a *thing*. It is a management *practice* that is used to help a company manage both explicit and tacit information in ways that enable the company to reuse the information and, when appropriate, to create new knowledge. More than anything else, knowledge management is an established atmosphere or environment, a *culture* if you will, in which the development and sharing of knowledge—at all levels within the company and including all levels of knowledge—is accepted as the essential element for the achievement of the corporate mission.

That definition provides a neat segue for describing the third component of Knowledge Services, what I like to refer to as strategic (performance-centered) learning. In the management community, we hear a great deal about this sort of thing as we think about organizational learning, and there's no question—at least in my mind—that organizational learning is the key to organizational success. And I have a definition: Strategic (performance-centered) learning is the successful achievement of skills, competencies, knowledge, behaviors, and/or other outcomes required for excellence in workplace performance. What we learn has to be application based, and it must relate directly to how it will be used.

In my opinion, the role of strategic (performance-centered) learning is so essential to the successful information/knowledge transaction that I have devised an acronym to describe it. In a book on professional learning to be published next year; I call it “KD/KS” (that is, Knowledge Development/Knowledge Sharing), and I describe it as “a framework for learning that embodies the highest objectives of knowledge management and combines them with the basic principles of the learning organization and the teaching organization.”

The learning organization we know about, for the work

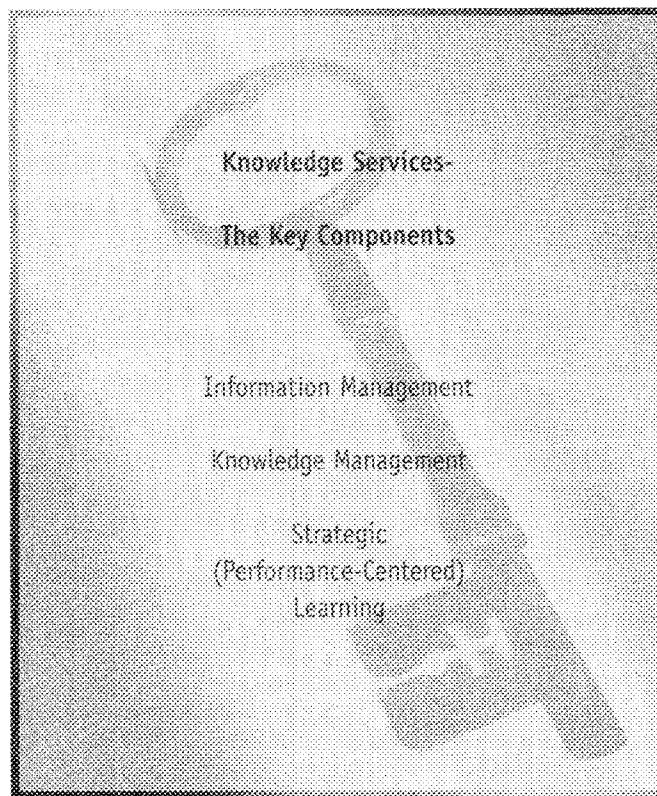
of Peter Senge and of others in this field is well documented. On the other hand, in the specialized library community, we have not heard much about the “teaching organization,” but it is an important concept developed by Noel M. Tichy and Eli Cohen. It gives us a new and very useful slant for the role that we play in the KD/KS process. Here is how Tichy and Cohen put it:

“The concepts underlying learning organizations are valuable. But to succeed in a highly competitive global marketplace, companies need to be able to change quickly; their people must be able to acquire and assimilate new knowledge and skills rapidly. Though learning is a necessary competency, it's not sufficient to assure marketplace success.

“Teaching organizations share with learning organizations the goal that *everyone continually acquire new knowledge and skills*. But to that they add the more critical goal that *everyone pass their learning on to others*.”

The approach that I am proposing—KD/KS—builds on the assumption that all learning stakeholders accept their responsibility to develop, to learn, and to share both tacit and explicit knowledge within the enterprise. As I see it, KD/KS exists for the benefit of the organizational enterprise with which the learning stakeholders are affiliated and which provides support for their learning endeavors, and for the growth and development of these stakeholders as lifelong learners.

Now as I have structured this third component of knowledge services, there are very distinct attributes to strategic (performance-based) learning. As noted, it combines knowledge development with knowledge sharing. It provides training and learning that is specific to the workplace, and, leading from that, it focuses on applications. Learning for the sake of learning? Of course. We all do it, and we relish doing it. But in our new information-intensive, knowledge-centric workplace, learning is related to



doing something. This learning, based on knowledge development and knowledge sharing, is specifically and directly didactic.

[As an aside, be sure to watch the semantics here, and understand what “fits” in your company. I’m indebted to my friend Lany McDonald for pointing out to me that in some organizations, “learning” has an academic ring to it. While most of us—educated and practicing early in our careers as librarians—don’t have any problem with this, such phraseology can be off-putting in certain situations. If “training” or “development” is the term your company uses to identify what I’m calling “strategic (performance-centered) learning,” by all means use the appropriate term. Whatever we do, if we’re going to lead this knowledge services effort in our organizations, we have to describe it in terms that fit the corporate culture.]

Is there a return on investment for introducing Knowledge Services to the organization? Of course. For a start, we think about the benefits that accrue from the “humanist” side of Knowledge Services, alluded to earlier (in the reference to Andrews’ newspaper column). If I’m interested in what some of these benefits are, I can come up with a long list, including things like putting my colleagues and co-workers (indeed, *any* stakeholders in *any* information/knowledge transfer transaction) in a position of strength as they do their work, or the improved efficiency, repeatability, and consistency of information use as it takes place in the company.

On the other hand, if I am manager in a typical organization, I want specifics. What I particularly want to know is how the company is either going to *make* money or *save* money by moving into the realm of knowledge services, which introduces the entire return-on-investment issue that sends most librarians and other information professionals running for the door.

“It’s just too hard to do,” they cry, “and there’s no way to codify or quantify such intangibles as information and knowledge use.”

Actually, there is, thanks to the good work of several people in the field today. Among these, Frank Portugal’s work (published by SLA) has identified several approaches that can be considered, including the standard ROI and cost benefit analysis approaches adapted for an information/knowledge-centric setting. Portugal also identifies three other approaches, and his descriptions of the knowledge value-added methodology, intranet

team forums, and intellectual capital valuation provide information managers with solid ideas and concepts that can be adapted for many organizations. By thinking about some of these in a specific context, ROI for knowledge services can be determined and should satisfy even the most cautious assessors.

These are exciting and fulfilling times for specialist librarians and information professionals. If we work hard to apply the processes (and customer-focused perspectives) of Knowledge Services to the work we do, *and* if we take the time and make the effort to establish the value of that work, we will make a difference in our parent organizations. In doing so, though, we run the risk—indeed, we will be recognized and be recruited for the job of leading the Knowledge Services effort for the parent organization as a whole, just as the title of this article predicts. With Knowledge Services, we stand to continue our long tradition of strength and support for the companies that employ us. They can ask no more, and we can do no less.

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