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***Building the Knowledge Culture***

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## **Knowledge Services: The Practical Side of KM**

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[The First Regional Conference on Knowledge Management was held 18-20 November 2015 in Nairobi Kenya. The conference theme was “KM and Innovation: Transforming Africa through Knowledge.” Guy St. Clair, Lecturer in Knowledge Services in the Postbaccalaureate Studies Program of Columbia University in the City of New York and SMR International President, described knowledge services for conference attendees.]

Good day to you all. I am greatly honored to be with you today — via Skype — and I congratulate you on the fine conference you have experienced so far.

It is clear to me that with the topics you are discussing here, you are opening new pathways for transforming Africa through knowledge. In choosing your conference theme you have taken on an important and far-reaching challenge, and our team at SMR International is very proud to be part of this very fine movement.

Indeed, SMR International has for some years shared a very strong strategic alliance with the Information Africa Organization, and I take special pride in congratulating Mr. William Mibei, IAO Executive Director, and Ms. Nerisa Jepkorir Kamar, SMR International’s SMRAfrica representative, on the fine work they and their team have done in putting together this important gathering of intellectuals, to think about and speak about how KM supports the transformation of Africa through knowledge.

I don’t need to dwell on the need for transformation, for you and your fine roster of speakers have already — and will do so even more tomorrow on your final day — dealt with the continent’s needs for transformation. You know what you need, and my brief commentary to you today will simply share with you a few more ideas as you embark on this splendid, exciting, and worthwhile journey.

And to get us started, I’ll begin with a challenge to you, and a little bit of history.

The challenge is this: Yes, knowledge management — what we like to refer to as “KM” — is indeed the tool we take up, for so many of us who work in what we call “the knowledge domain.” We embrace this work enthusiastically, for through our work with KM we enable our organizations and our academic institutions to ensure that organizational and corporate knowledge is developed, shared, and utilized to the best advantage of the parent organization.

Indeed, in much of our work we have a clever little acronym for this knowledge development, knowledge sharing, and knowledge utilization. We call it “KD/KS/KU,” and we use the acronym to identify specifically what it is we are seeking to do. We want — in our institutions and organizations — to have a KD/KS/KU scheme that matches as closely as possible and as well as possible (we’re speaking about “performance excellence” here) our ability to meet the needs of those who work with us.

It is our job — with KD/KS/KU — to enable our co-workers to achieve the information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning objectives they require, so they can perform at the highest levels of excellence in the work *they* are doing.

So my challenge to you is, yes, to continue to think of KM as the tool that will get us and our organizations to where we need to be, with respect to KD/KS/KU. At the same time, though, I challenge you to go a little further, “drill a little deeper” (we might say) and refine your KM practice to a different level, using a discipline I discovered a few years ago, a management and service-delivery practice that enables a higher level of intellectual and knowledge-sharing interaction than is available solely through KM.

Of course you know already what I’m talking about, from the title of this presentation. I’m speaking about knowledge services, a way of thinking about knowledge sharing that is the *practical* side of KM, what we might call (as Dale Stanley — my partner at SMR International — puts it) “putting KM to work.”

So having made that challenge, let me share with you the knowledge services construct and attempt, if I can, to persuade you to agree with me that knowledge services is, indeed, the proper mechanism for “putting knowledge management to work” to ensure that Africa is transformed.

Of course I’m often asked to give my own definition for knowledge services, and I’m happy to do so, on this occasion as on many others.

Knowledge services is the management methodology — the management technique — that converges and blends information management (including technology management), knowledge management, and strategic learning for the benefit of a parent organization or business.

As a discipline, knowledge services connects with organizational success as knowledge workers seek to improve knowledge sharing in the company or the organization. It enables (or strengthens) knowledge sharing as the parent enterprise moves forward in the achievement of its organizational or business mission. In organizations, knowledge services (yes, we use the singular verb since the phrase “knowledge services” is what we think of in English grammar as a “compound subject” and as such, we apply the singular verb), knowledge services is recognized as enabling knowledge development, knowledge sharing, and knowledge use (or application), characterized with that popular acronym I mentioned a moment ago, KD/KS/KU.

Enterprise leaders and organizational managers embrace knowledge services as the critical element in the development of a knowledge strategy for the company or the organization, establishing a structure that ensures knowledge sharing throughout the organization, for the

benefit of all stakeholders and affiliates. One reason has to do with what they experienced with knowledge management, beginning a couple of decades ago.

When KM first came on the scene, in the mid-1990s, there was some excitement for a while but then, for a wide variety of reasons the whole “notion” of KM began to be thought of as just another management “fad.” Indeed, KM was often maligned. Now, fortunately, things have changed, and we have what one observer calls a “more mature model for how institutions deal with information — a combination of developing, curating, sharing, and implementing information and expertise from internal and external sources.”<sup>1</sup>

This combination — developing, curating, sharing, and implementing information and expertise from internal and external sources — is how I characterize the practice of knowledge services.

Here’s how it came about:

During the last decade — and in some cases stretching out over another prior decade or so — corporate and organizational leaders came to recognize the benefits of high-quality information and knowledge management. It has been a phenomenal realization, this sea change in organizational management, and it affects every information and knowledge exchange that takes place in every functional unit of every company or organization (indeed, some make the case that this move toward quality information- and knowledge-sharing is taking place in society at large).

Thus it is no surprise that with all the talk about “big data” and “drowning in information,” companies and organizations have devised new approaches to information and knowledge management. What we are witnessing is nothing less than a cutting-edge opening for innovative thinking, as enterprise leaders think about their company’s intellectual capital, and about how critical it is to manage that knowledge carefully.

As I noted earlier, it wasn’t always like this. For many years, people who needed information or knowledge for their work just figured out how to get it, sometimes doing a good job of it and at other times costing the firm or the company great deals of money because the needed information was so hard to come by.

By the 1980s or so, things started to change, and certain signs were leading us to think seriously about the management of information and knowledge. For one thing, increased computer power had put us all on guard that something important was happening. While some of the runes were misread (such as the prediction about the “paperless office” — remember that one?), there was no doubt but that the new field of information management and information science would enable sophisticated information capture and retrieval.

Dame Lynne Brindley, Chief Executive, The British Library, at the time described what happened:

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<sup>1</sup> Hydock, Jim (2015). [SLA: Standing at the Crossroads](#). Outsell, Inc.

The concept of the information strategy was emerging, whereby information and libraries were seen as important knowledge resources to be harnessed and increasingly treated as a strategic asset — to underpin teaching and learning, research, and knowledge transfer activities — which needed to be valued and managed.<sup>2</sup>

Information strategies emerged in the 1990s in universities, with more or less enthusiasm, and beyond universities the focus was on the discipline of knowledge management, the concept of knowledge exploitation (in the classical, positive sense of that word) for competitive edge. There was recognition of the increasing economic value of information — of knowledge, both tacit (in people’s heads) and explicit (more formal), as a key element of the corporate assets of the business.

Brindley went on to note that a strong proponent in this recognition of the emerging knowledge-based economy was Thomas Stewart, who had defined intellectual capital as “intellectual material that is put to use to create wealth.”

In doing so, Stewart introduced the concept of KM (although it was not called “KM” at the time): “Intellectual capital,” he called it. “Intellectual capital is the sum of everything everybody in a company knows that gives it a competitive edge.”<sup>3</sup>

So the movement toward “knowledge management” now began to make sense, and KM began to gain attention among leaders in the management community. And as management began to connect the electronic capture of KM elements with knowledge sharing, performance, and strategic learning, the advantages of KM began to fall into place (and, importantly, to be recognized as corporate advantages). These advantages, in turn, began to make even more sense when senior managers began to recognize the futility of speaking about “managing” knowledge and put their interest in knowledge development, knowledge sharing, and knowledge utilization into more practical terms.

And since enterprise leaders could not — quite understandably — grasp the idea of knowledge management, they had to be given something they could understand, a practical approach to servicing the knowledge-sharing needs of their employees, partners, affiliates, and anyone else with a reasonable interest in their organization’s effectiveness.

One thing executives did understand was the concept of services, enterprise support activities that are part of the organizational financial framework and included in that framework — as part of the cost of doing business — or contracted out and paid for. So it made sense for them to respond to the idea of services for knowledge sharing. And since they understood the purpose and function of, say, legal services, or accounting services, or HR services, they could understand the purpose and function of knowledge services.

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<sup>2</sup> Brindley, Dame Lynne (2009). “[Challenges for Great Libraries in the Age of the Digital Native](#).” National Federation of Advanced Information Services (NFAIS). Conrad Lecture, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Stewart, Thomas A. (1997). *Intellectual capital: The New Wealth of Organizations*. New York: Doubleday.

At the same time, these organizational and corporate management leaders began to recognize that enterprise-wide knowledge sharing cannot take place through the outputs of discreet functional entities, which gave us another reason for bringing in knowledge services. With the build-up of these many separate and distinctive disciplines for handling knowledge content over the years — along with the concomitant growth of academic or academic-type education and training in support of those disciplines — organizations became flooded with functional units that were theoretically supposed to be about knowledge capture and knowledge sharing.

In reality, exactly the opposite happened. With functional units such as records management departments, specialized libraries, corporate archives, staff training and learning units, even information technology departments, database design units, or web development units, to name a few, being created and put into place as individual and separate operational entities, no one was looking after enterprise-wide knowledge development, knowledge sharing, and knowledge utilization. No thought was being given to an institution-wide knowledge culture, one that would engage not only the usual knowledge-focused units of the organization, but all functional units (since they were all challenged to develop and share knowledge). The entire organization needed a practical way to deal with knowledge, to establish some sort of efficiency in each section and to be of benefit to the larger enterprise.

Enter knowledge services.

And — I'm happy to say — I saw it happening. I began to realize in the late 1990s that there were elements in the overall concepts having to do with knowledge management that were inhibiting its broad acceptance. I began to look around, to think about it, and some things began to fall into place for me. By 2000 or so, I had written a number of articles about knowledge services, had had a book on the topic published in 2005, and that same year I was invited to write the preface for a book on graduate education for library and information science. It was then — while writing that preface — that I realized why I had resisted KM as it was being practiced (or not being practiced, in many cases): my background had been in library science, and though I no longer worked as a librarian or information specialist — I was busy as a consultant in planning for knowledge services by this time — as I wrote that preface I realized that the connection between library and information science and knowledge services was clear and distinct:

Today (I wrote in 2005) we speak of librarianship, information management, knowledge management, and their overarching connection with learning, and we gather this entire realm of knowledge seeking into the discipline of knowledge services. This new discipline — the convergence of librarianship, information management, knowledge management, and learning — builds on the basic foundations of library science — as a *science* for the organization of knowledge — to lead the user in his or her quest.<sup>4</sup>

And as I continued my work in knowledge services, one of the places where it was most impressive (for me) was in Africa, where I observed knowledge management being put into practice in the region's graduate schools, in particular in graduate studies in agriculture.

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<sup>4</sup> St. Clair, Guy (2005). *Bibliothekswissenschaft — quo vadis? Library Science — quo vadis?: A Discipline Between Challenges and Opportunities*. Munich: De Gruyter.

Indeed, one of the earliest surprises for a knowledge services specialist arriving in Kenya (as was the case with me, arriving in 2009 and working in Kenya through all of 2010) was to learn about the attention given to KM in several academic institutions. I observed three universities offering studies in KM (Egerton University and the University of Nairobi in Kenya and Haramaya University in Ethiopia). While these initiatives were still in the early stages when I was there, I was able to observe the universities developing course content and building capacity for staff to teach in the programme. These universities were well on their way to institutionalizing the teaching of KM and knowledge services as a substantive element of graduate education.<sup>5</sup>

And by the late 1990s, we were speaking about knowledge services, in Kenya and in workplaces throughout the world. We were recognizing that knowledge services was (and is) the management and service-delivery discipline — a way to work — that combines information management, KM, and strategic learning into a single over-arching operational function. (St. Clair, 2012) As a management methodology and discipline, knowledge services recognizes that the most critical asset of any group or environment is what its people know. This knowledge — this intellectual capital — is the organization’s most competitive asset, with the result that moving to knowledge services provides the organization with the tools its people require for ensuring that the organization’s intellectual assets are captured, organized, analyzed, interpreted, and customized for maximum return to the institution.<sup>6</sup>

And it was in Kenya that I was able — toward the end of my time there — to give purpose to much of my thinking about KM, the knowledge culture, and knowledge services. I was asked to speak in 2010 about knowledge services (by now “my” subject) at the Fifth Annual Research Week and International Conference, at the Agricultural Resources Center, Egerton University. The title of my presentation was “KM and Knowledge Services: The Future of Academic Knowledge Sharing is *Now*,” and the responses to my presentation were extremely gratifying.<sup>7</sup>

As it happens — and it’s the beauty of knowledge services strategy — all activities, at every level, require KD/KS/KU. The principles for managing knowledge services in whatever line of work for which knowledge is developed, shared, and utilized can be applied to the management of all of the company’s intellectual capital and, at the same time, ensure that knowledge services — as a management and service-delivery tool — rises to the highest levels knowledge services can achieve. As you move forward in meeting the challenges of KM and innovation to transform Africa through knowledge, make it easy on yourselves and go for the practical side of KM. Dive deep and embrace knowledge services. You’ll find it to be very worthwhile journey.

Thank you.

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<sup>5</sup> St. Clair, Guy (2010). [Closing the Digital Divide: Dealing with Drucker’s ‘Responsibility Gap’ in Africa — Kenya Anticipates the ICT/KM Future with Enthusiasm](#). (New York: SMR International Special Report)

<sup>6</sup> St. Clair, Guy (2001). “[Knowledge Services: Your Company’s Key to Performance Excellence](#).” *Information Outlook* 5 (6), June 2001.

<sup>7</sup> St. Clair, Guy (2010). “KM/Knowledge Services: The Future of Academic Knowledge Sharing is *Now*.” Transformative Research for Sustainable Development Thursday, Fifth Annual Research Week and International Conference, Agricultural Resources Center, Egerton University, Njora, Kenya, 23 September 2010.