

# Why KM should join the library

## Victoria Ward explains the growing role of the librarian in promoting membership within communities.

You would think that the natural leaders in a knowledge economy would be librarians. Are they not the arch intermediaries of content in an age of burgeoning information? Apparently not. The stereotypes abound: tweed skirts; lack of ambition; lack of technology expertise. But now that the production of content is in the hands of the workers, are librarians about to become agents of change?

If so, they should be exploratory as well as acquisitive. They must be masters of data systems and human/computer interaction. The role must now extend beyond mere categories to a higher order. They cannot be confined to disciplines – they must bring order to chaos and preserve organizational knowledge.

### Using poetry to build a collaborative culture

In 1997, the British Poetry Library at the Royal Festival Hall in London and the Performing Arts Education Section met to look at ways to encourage people to expand their reading. Being a large organization employing over 1,000 people, the first audience they targeted was their own employees.

The library decided to invite staff to pick their favorite poem and share their enjoyment with other employees. A notice was posted around the building which read: “Picture this: you are standing in the Poetry Library surrounded by the best in contemporary verse – sonnets, ballads, haiku – you are asked to pick one poem, just one poem. Where do you begin?”

Nine people were selected to choose a poem, and for nine weeks the library displayed one every week

alongside a photograph of the employee who had chosen it. Staff were invited to visit and read the poem. Interest grew, and more and more staff visited. The desired result was achieved – more poetry was being read, but more importantly, people were interacting in ways they had never done before.

The project aimed to do several things: promote reading; overcome the isolation that staff can feel in a large organization; and raise employee awareness of the wide collection of contemporary poetry. It succeeded in achieving all three.

### Community building

In this case, the librarian combined the knowledge assets of both physical space and poetry and used them as a catalyst for community development. This combination of visual exhibition and discussion forum in the library brought employees together who might otherwise have not interacted.

Etienne Wenger, renowned expert on building communities of practice, suggests that participation, or interaction, combines with artefacts to create a negotiated meaning. The contribution and co-creation (participation) which goes to make and view an exhibition (collection of artefacts to form a fused artefact) has the power to create a new shared understanding.<sup>1</sup>

The knowledge economy has been described as an economy of conversation. In the poetry library example, new conversations took place as a result of the exhibition, initiating a more collaborative culture.

### Encouraging membership

Perhaps the most important asset of all is membership. Recent work by Demos<sup>2</sup> points towards mutuality, ownership and co-evolution as a new defining organizational model. *Net Gain*<sup>3</sup> identifies the most important assets of a virtual

community not as its content or clients, but as its membership – it’s only through membership that a sense of privilege, access and commitment can emerge which forms the foundation of community.

Librarians, as well as being custodians of collections, must also be the administrators of assets such as space, archives, and skills to promote membership to the knowledge community. Membership crosses organizational boundaries and librarians should be the beacons – the axes of collection and connection.

They can also form the focal point for the organization’s collective memory by seeing the enterprise as a living archive. It’s the remit of the librarian to ensure content is easy to navigate. Vast collections need signposting and constant management or content will get lost. Good navigation needs strong narrative threads which will allow the individual to orientate and connect. The librarian can act as narrator, navigator and archivist of the enterprise, promoting understanding and links while ensuring disciplined selection of content which represents the organization as an engaging whole.

Fluid boundaries mean organizations do not yield easily to a central authority. The glue which will bind a networked enterprise in a common endeavor can only come from librarians.

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1. Wenger, E., *Communities of Practice; Learning, Meaning & Identity*, CUP 1998
2. Leaderbeater, C, and Christie, I, *To our Mutual Advantage*, Demos 1999
3. Hagel J, Armstrong A. *Net Gain*, HBSP, 1997
4. [www.cluetrain.com](http://www.cluetrain.com)

Thanks to Mark Field of the Libraries Association.

Are you a librarian working in knowledge management? We'd like to hear your experiences.