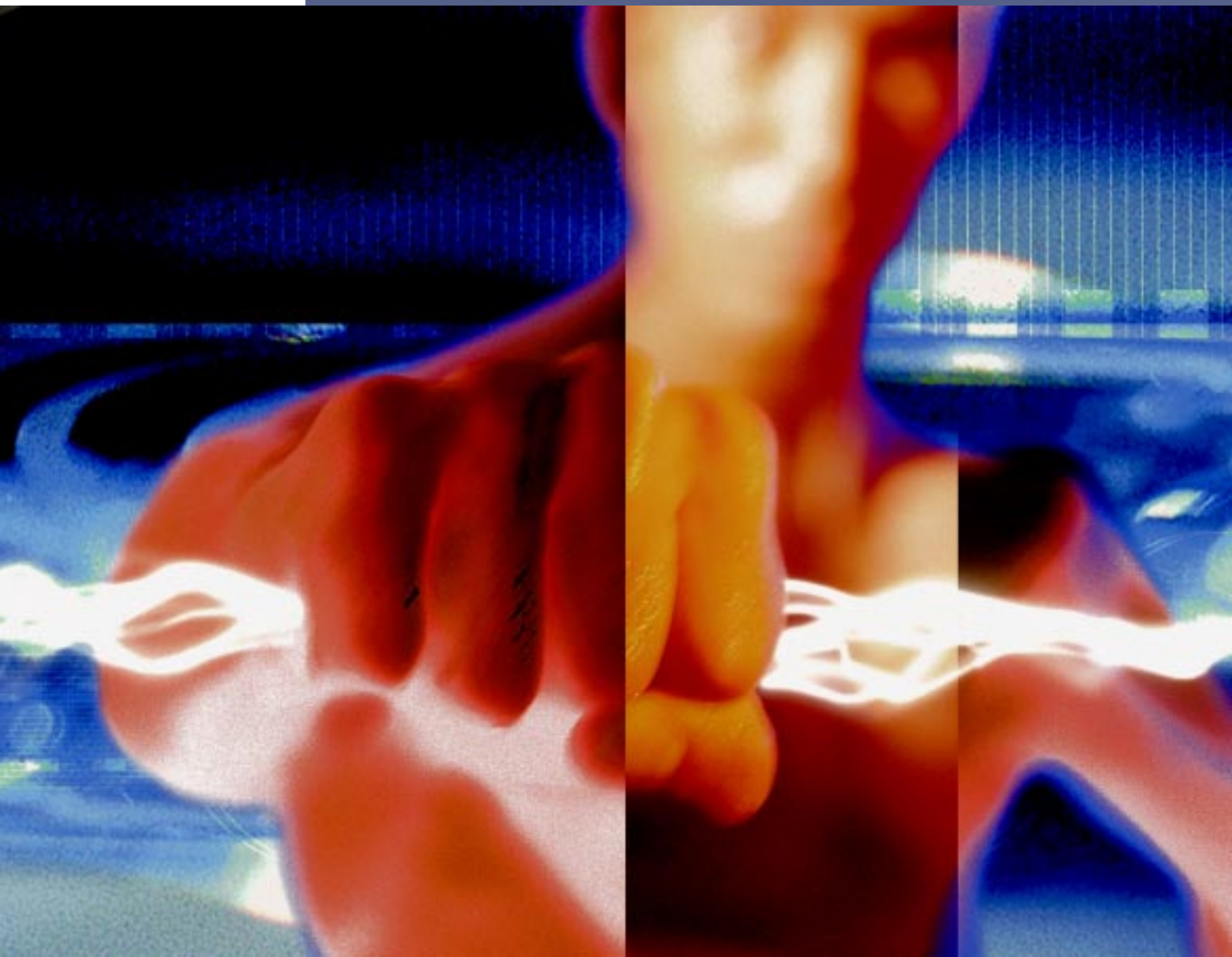


Creating A Collaborative Environment: The Human Element



by Cheryl M. Lamb

Cheryl Lamb, a twenty-year SLA member, is manager, Knowledge Resource Center (KRC) for Buckman Laboratories International. She may be reached at cmlamb@buckman.com

••• Knowledge Management Extends Beyond the Explicit World

MANY ORGANIZATIONS SEEK KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS FROM technology when, in truth, technology should play only a supporting role. As organizations head down the knowledge management road—embracing the world of the Internet, intranets, and extranets—they are also discovering that it is the people and processes supported by appropriate technologies that deliver real results.

Information professionals are re-defining their roles as information technology creates new challenges and opportunities. Librarians, information specialists/scientists/professionals, and so-called “cybrarians,” are the knowledge workers with the capability and expertise to connect people with the information they require. This ability to connect people and knowledge places them in an invaluable position that is crucial in building a balanced and sustainable knowledge management program.

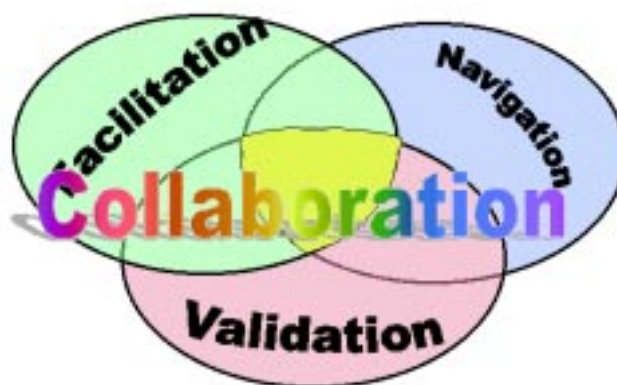
Knowledge management extends beyond the explicit world. Librarians are instrumental in capturing, organizing, codifying, and disseminating information produced in written form or other media. Knowledge management programs now strive to employ the same processes in the tacit realm. Unfortunately, one cannot manage the tacit knowledge that resides in another person’s mind. It is possible, however, to manage the environment so that the sharing of that knowledge can flourish. This is a new role for the librarian—the role of an infomediary.

There are four key components to the organizational knowledge backbone:

- Organization of knowledge using a normalized taxonomy that enhances the goals of an organization.
- Availability of information/knowledge when and where it is needed through high-end intelligent access.
- Ability to connect knowledge with the people who created it (pairing knowledge with experts).
- Publication of knowledge so it can be re-used and further shared.

For any knowledge management program to succeed, a collaborative environment must exist. The importance of a knowledge-sharing culture in organizations is well established. Still, corporate cultures are as different as the organizations from which they come. Regardless of the existing corporate culture, however, infomediaries must play a key role in promoting and nurturing a collaborative environment.

Creating a Collaborative Environment



Navigation

The ability to locate key information/knowledge quickly is imperative in today’s economy. Navigation includes identifying and providing books, journals, videos, specific data or other materials required to the customer. Locating exactly what is needed requires a sophisticated knowledge of various information products, as well as an understanding of how to obtain information or tacit knowledge from recognized internal and (perhaps) external experts. It requires the understanding and use of Boolean logic to evaluate search engines from the user perspective, as well as knowing what to implement for effective content retrieval.

Networking is a key component of navigation. Knowing or identifying experts in a particular area and pairing the user with the expert for one-on-one exchange can sometimes mean the difference between project success and project failure. Building lasting relationships with experts through knowledge networks can be invaluable. The key or solution to a problem may be found in the mind of another person (within or without the organization) in the form of knowledge gained through personal experience.

Until recently, MIS departments created and designed databases independently, seeking little or no help from information professionals. With the growing demand for content management, however, MIS professionals are beginning to understand the need for “metadata.” The cataloging and indexing courses that many information professionals take in library school make us natural con-

tributors to this work. Through effective use of the information professional’s capabilities, we create a more solid foundation for resource-organizing activities on the Internet, as well as on intranets and extranets. Codification and indexing of resources are the backbone of the library community; they are some of the things that librarians do best. Collaborative interaction between MIS and information professionals in both the design and deployment of electronic databases allows the user to navigate a wide variety of valuable resources more quickly, more easily and with greater success.

technical and psychological barriers in the quest to nurture knowledge sharing. Mentoring, encouraging and training others for knowledge sharing are essential for any knowledge management program to succeed.

Regardless of the existing corporate culture, however, infomediaries must play a key role in promoting and nurturing a collaborative environment.

tributors to this work. Through effective use of the information professional’s capabilities, we create a more solid foundation for resource-organizing activities on the Internet, as well as on intranets and extranets. Codification and indexing of resources are the backbone of the library community; they are some of the things that librarians do best. Collaborative interaction between MIS and information professionals in both the design and deployment of electronic databases allows the user to navigate a wide variety of valuable resources more quickly, more easily and with greater success.

Validation

Once information or knowledge is located, it needs to be validated. (This is true regardless of the source.) We are living in a time in which information overload is rampant, making it necessary for us to filter and aggregate information sources as never before. Infomediaries must ensure that information is correct and concise, is appropriate to the needs of the requester, and, most importantly, that it is from a reputable source. Failure to validate knowledge resources can result in redundancy of effort, slow or incorrect decision-making, and possibly a reduction in customer base or market share. Failure to validate knowledge resources can also result in an irrevocable loss of credibility on the part of the information professional, something that definitely must be avoided.

Facilitation

Both navigation and validation are familiar elements of the information professional’s practice. Today, however, information professionals may also need to assume new and perhaps unfamiliar roles. For example, given the increased demand for knowledge or information that does not reside in the printed word, infomediaries can serve as invaluable facilitators. In a truly collaborative environment, knowledge sharing is the norm not the exception. Infomediaries can help break down cultural,

their organizations both vertically and horizontally. These personal networks provide a direct people-to-people link. Beyond the myriad explicit knowledge bases available today are the tacit knowledge bases unique to each person, resources that are constantly evolving. The challenge is to convince individuals to share their knowledge and then help them become capable of doing so. None of us can acquire wisdom without the time and effort investment that knowledge sharing demands.

There are many barriers to communication in any organization. Since people put all of them up, we must take responsibility for removing them. Some of these barriers are cultural in nature: language, ethnic, or geographic for instance. Cultural sensitivity will help to overcome many of these obstacles. Technical barriers, such a lack of skills in using specific hardware or software, can be lessened or eliminated by offering appropriate training. Encouragement and support can diminish the technology-based fears that some people may experience.

The primary barrier to knowledge sharing is a lack of trust. A person who receives information must be able to trust that the information shared is the best available, and the provider must trust that the receiver will use the information in an appropriate way. It is when an organization can achieve that level of trust that true knowledge sharing occurs.

Technology can be used to facilitate knowledge sharing when appropriate. It may take the form of online discussion forums or publishing on a corporate intranet. Irrelevant and stale content in either arena does not attract conversation or interest. A search for knowledge that returns outdated or inaccurate information will not generate the conversations that can lead to innovative products or processes.

There are three components to creating a collaborative environment as discussed above: navigation, validation, and facilitation. Each of these components is important and can stand on its own merit, but it is only when all three components are interactively engaged that a collaborative environment can flourish.

Leverage Existing Skills

For an organization to move from the old paradigm of “knowledge is power” to one in which collective knowledge sharing is power requires the leadership and skills of highly motivated information professionals. Knowledge infomediaries bring capabilities that even the most sophisticated KM technological systems cannot offer. It is the human element that often decides if a KM initiative will succeed or fail. The skills that the infomediary brings to knowledge management are:

- Information selection and integration skills
- Information organization (micro and macro) skills
- Interface selection and design combined with training skills
- Searching, finding and usage (analysis, packaging, reporting skills)
- High-level information literacy skills
- “Sherlock Holmes” instincts

- People person (networking, nurturing, mentoring skills)
- Credibility

Although for some it is a challenge, it is still a key responsibility of infomediaries to nurture, facilitate, and maintain the quality and relevance of content available within any knowledge management endeavor by leveraging their expertise and experience gained in library and information management.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of any knowledge management effort is to make knowledge visible and accessible throughout the entire organization. To achieve that goal requires the creation of an infrastructure that includes people, technology, tools, and practice. Of course, the most of important of these elements is people. Infomediaries are unique individuals who understand how to capitalize on information technology, maintain a synergy between traditional and new information practices, and facilitate knowledge sharing. As Tom Davenport argues, “Successful knowledge transfer involves neither computers nor documents, but rather interactions between people.” 