

The Role of the Librarian in a Knowledge Society
The proceedings of a lecture/workshop at Sultan Qaboos University,
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expertise, guides, navigation, skills, technology transfer, community, curiosity,
network, language, education.

Contents

1. The purpose of this paper
2. Introduction
3. Libraries and librarians
4. The broader Omani context
5. Information, knowledge and intellectual capital
6. What is knowledge management?
7. Group work at lecture/workshop
8. Key active roles for librarians
9. The importance of networks
10. History, tradition and language
11. Conclusion

Appendices

Appendix i	The questioning framework
Appendix ii	Issues for setting up a successful network
Appendix iii	Mapping. Setting up an expertise directory - guiding principles
Appendix iv	Further reading and resources
Appendix v	The sponsoring organisations

1. PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

- 1.1 To report on proceedings so that there is a record for those who attended and for those who are interested in the subject.
- 1.2 To do so in such a way that the report might be useful as a founding document to develop strategies and approaches to develop the active role of the librarian in the knowledge society.
- 1.3 To provide a reference on current concepts and issues in knowledge management for those in libraries and information positions in Oman.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 This lecture/workshop was created with five key questions in mind:

- ? How best can the libraries in Oman develop library resources and promote library facilities?
- ? How can librarians create a purposeful knowledge environment in a university, college or any learning environment?
- ? In what ways can the intellectual capital and expertise of accomplished people in Oman be exploited as a national asset?
- ? What are the ways in which Oman can develop the active role of the librarian and the information provider in promoting a knowledge society?
- ? In what ways can communication exchanges best be set up among librarians in Oman to further their professional development?

3. LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS IN OMAN

- 3.1 The audience for this event was invited by The British Council from its database of librarians. This includes librarians and information professionals working in the university, colleges of education, private tertiary colleges, technical and industrial colleges, a museum library, ministry libraries, the Public Technical Library and specialist colleges, such as the College of Sharia and Law. The students and faculty members of the Department of Library and Information Science at SQU also attended. Invitations were also extended to other members of the education profession, as many have asked to be included in the database
- 3.2 There are no free public lending libraries in Oman, so all librarians belong to institutions which manage their libraries. These range from major educational institutions to the Majlis A'Shura (the elected chamber in Oman), which supply specialised information to those institutions. They are therefore isolated and as there is no professional library association there is no forum to debate ongoing

issues, or to share and develop ideas, good practice or innovations. Furthermore, the population is not socialised into using libraries and has limited access to reference materials. While great store is being set by the Internet it should be noted that out of a population of 2.2 million, only 28,000 are connected to the Internet. Home computers are not common items outside the main towns.

- 3.3 Many institutions have set up self-access learning centres where the students are encouraged to develop independent learning skills. However, the librarian is still needed to support the teachers and learners and to develop curriculum support in these centres and also to teach students the skills needed.

4. THE BROADER OMANI CONTEXT

- 4.1 If countries are moving towards being knowledge societies, the concomitant is that they are also learning societies. In Oman learning and education have a very high priority. The culture places a premium on learning and parents are very committed to their children working hard at school. Competition for places at the university is fierce and the government spends a significant amount of its budget on sending those who are capable to study for higher degrees overseas.

- 4.2 Oman has a developed economy based on petroleum products. 95% of the wealth of the country is based on this and the government has been trying to diversify the economy as the oil supply is finite. The oil revenue came on stream in 1970, which is generally taken to be the date of Oman's modern renaissance, when Sultan Qaboos bin Said came to power. Prior to 1970, Oman was a virtually unknown country with an economy based on fishing, subsistence farming and some trading. The subsequent need for highly skilled professionals has meant that the country relied on expatriate labour and expertise. Expatriate labour also offered necessary assistance to build the country's infrastructure, including roads and utilities. Much of the indigenous working population has now moved to major regional cities or Muscat, the capital of Oman. Small rural communities still exist but now have the technical and social infrastructure to support them.

- 4.3 Oman is governed by the Sultan, but in addition there are two chambers of representatives, which consider all issues of government and advise the Sultan. These are the Majlis A'Shura, which is an elected body of 82 representatives, and the Majlis Addawla, which is appointed by the Sultan. Oman has used its wealth wisely, founding a national health and education system and has developed a system of higher education which has begun to supply the professionals the country needs.

- 4.4 In order to reduce the reliance on expatriate labour, there is a national programme of Omanisation which has targets for each profession. To support this, Oman has created a Vocational and Education Training programme and is currently developing four private universities, based in the regions as well as in Muscat. In addition, many private sector corporations are committed to recruiting and training Omani staff.

- 4.5 In many ways Oman already demonstrates very effective approaches consistent with a mature knowledge society. One small example could be seen during the lecture/workshop, where six groups from the College of Science Students' Society of Sultan Qaboos University had on display exhibits to demonstrate their activities. The society groups have been formed voluntarily by the students. The overall aims of the Society are to:
1. Encourage extra-curricular activities, to provide students with opportunities outside academic work.
 2. To develop abilities to work in teams.
 3. Strengthen the relationship between staff and students.
 4. Foster and encourage the creative ability of students.
 5. Acquaint students with skills that help them in their careers.
 6. Participate in community development activities and programmes.
 7. Participate in community development activities and programmes.
(*Extract from the Students' Science Week Programme 2001*)
- 4.6 The role of the information professional is crucial in developing economic progress in Oman. Professionals are committed to upgrading their qualifications and the concept of life-long learning is being actively considered in Oman. The university is developing its masters programmes and in due course will be able to supervise PhD students and develop research programmes. The issue of transferring research into industry is being considered and therefore the collation of research papers and knowledge of what is being developed will fall to the librarians.
- 4.7 During March 2001, Oman hosted a conference entitled The University of the 21st Century, in collaboration with UNESCO. Many international speakers attended and gave papers. The Ministry of Higher Education is currently embarking on a major expansion of tertiary education, including four new universities. It is also developing systems of quality assurance. This expansion will need highly qualified information professionals, not only to be pro-active in developing information systems for these new institutions but also in evaluating them.
- 4.8 The concept of discussion and consultation has been present in Oman throughout its history. The word *majlis* covers many types of meeting places, from the elected chamber to a domestic dwelling. The concept of an information majlis, either virtual or real, is a very strong one. Discussions are intended to lead to a consensus.
- 4.9 Information in Oman is not only recorded in texts. The country's rich history is also recorded and exhibited in museums and galleries. The Bait al-Zubair Museum houses the private collection of the Al Zubair family. The museum was founded by His Excellency Mohammad Al Zubair, Advisor to HM the Sultan for Economic Planning Affairs and former President of Sultan Qaboos University. It displays artefacts spanning many centuries of Oman's history. The museum is laid out so that the visitor can absorb (and enjoy) many aspects of Oman and how its people have fared throughout history. The museum also has a library that relates to Oman and keeps manuscripts, documents (both historical and new), periodicals, journals, books, photographic archives, catalogue details of the museum collection and research papers and notes in both Arabic and English.
- 4.10 Historically, Oman is famous for its maritime achievements. Sindbad the sailor is believed to have been from Oman. His character may have been based on Omani sailors who reached as far as China in the 10th century and established early trade links.

For centuries, Muscat has been an important international port and prosperous commercial centre that was a meeting place for many different cultures and nationalities. The great wealth of history and traditions can be seen from its shores to the tops of the high ragged mountains.

(HE Mohammad Al Zubair, founder of Bait Al Zubair Museum)

This has made Oman an outgoing nation, whose people are welcoming to strangers and tolerant of other societies. It should be noted that both Christians and Hindus can practice their religions freely at churches and temples built on land donated by the Sultan.

- 4.11 Oman has also traded for several centuries and there is a merchant class, which operates to this day on a full international scale. It also controlled trading routes and a vast trading empire in 17th and 18th centuries.

5 INFORMATION, KNOWLEDGE AND INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL

Intellectual capital represents the resources that produce imagination, inventiveness, and competitiveness through the generation and dissemination of thoughts, ideas and fresh approaches. It is the sum and synergy of knowledge, experience, relationships, processes, discoveries, innovation, market presence, and community influence.

(Tom Stewart, editor of Fortune Magazine and one of the original thinkers who wrote about intellectual capital and knowledge management.)

- 5.1 Information surrounds us, often sent free and in abundant quantities. Using and analysing this information leads to knowledge. Experience is also a key factor in knowledge. An example from daily life is the information that the car service garage opens after 16.30, but knowledge is that the owner is there all the time and you can pick up your car at any time. Conversely, a shop displays its opening times but everyone knows it opens half an hour later. Professor Clive Holtham of the City University Business School describes the difference in the following way: “information is the fuel of knowledge. Information is essentially inert. It needs a spark or catalyst to achieve enlightenment.”
- 5.2 The relationship between information and knowledge has changed dramatically during the 20th century. Up until the end of the 20th century, it has been said that we treated information like gold – in short supply. With computerisation it is becoming more like milk, at least in the European context, and is increasingly overwhelming, or overloading in its quantity.
- 5.3 For Oman, knowledge will be the application of information to building its future workforce and founding a society with a high skills level where knowledge has an economic advantage.
- 5.4 The World Bank *World Development Report* of 1998 identifies knowledge, and the ability to improve knowledge as “dynamic competitive advantage” - that is to say the relative advantage that countries can create for themselves. They do this by:
1. acquiring and adapting global knowledge and creating knowledge locally

2. investing in human capital to increase the ability to absorb and use knowledge
3. investing in the technologies that facilitate both the acquisition and the absorption of knowledge.

To test whether a community has adopted a mature approach to developing a knowledge society we need to look at:

- ? The development of 'human capital', through investment in education
- ? Investment in Research and Development
- ? Openness to trade
- ? The presence of an infrastructure to disseminate information

The report goes on to say that “knowledge is not just the key to development, it **is** development” and that the “need to transform resources and use them in new ways for knowledge is directly related to the standard of living”. This includes better use of knowledge in policy making or in developing production processes as well as better development and use of the learning and know-how of scientists, students and engineers. It can be seen from the previous sections that in many respects, Oman is already operating as a mature knowledge society.

Perhaps most important in this context, the report identifies the critical role of networks and communities in the gathering, development and dissemination of knowledge.

- 5.5 Theorists and practitioners of knowledge management often turn to metaphor to help convey the ideas. Metaphors of mapping (making things visible) and of navigation (providing tools and experience for guidance) are very frequently used as a way of conveying the principles. Another useful metaphor which is related to these is of a horizon:

VISIBLE (explicit, tangible)

horizon

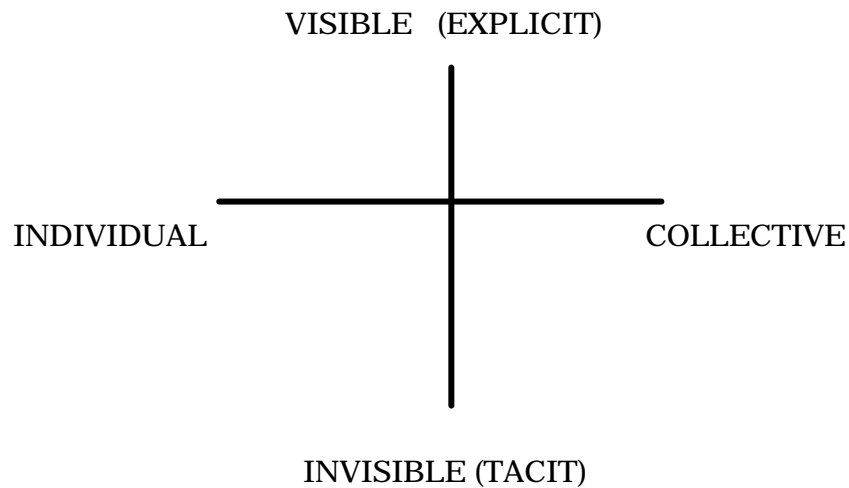
INVISIBLE (tacit, intangible)

Visible knowledge is to be found in patents, rulebooks, intellectual property, formal records of a company, written music and so on. Often this is called explicit knowledge. Invisible knowledge is often called tacit knowledge and this might be found in the knowledge of an individual riding a bike. Invisible knowledge, like visible knowledge can be the knowledge of an individual or of a group. The terms “explicit” and “tacit” or “tangible” and “intangible” are often used interchangeably. **The important thing to understand is that knowledge management is viewed as effective where the relationship between the explicit and the tacit knowledge is such that each feeds and nurtures the other.**

For example, a jazz musician has his own personal knowledge of how to play the trumpet, and some of this may be written down, or some may be in his head. A group of jazz musicians who improvise together might be working with a song

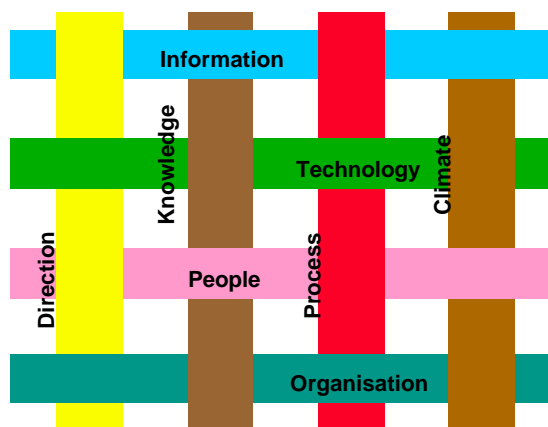
which has been written down, but they will only be using the written music as a loose guide for them to play together and bring their individual musicianship together during the playing of the song in a unique way.

Therefore, it might be useful to think of the horizon in a slightly different way as a matrix when thinking of the range between individual and collective knowledge:



5.6 Another good metaphor comes from Professor Clive Holtham, who describes knowledge as part of the fabric of an organisation or society with information, people technology and organisation being woven together by direction, knowledge, process and climate.

The Knowledge Fabric



6 WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT?

6.1 Knowledge management is a subject that has commanded increasing attention at a corporate as well as a national level. But what are the key elements of a knowledge management programme? How do these connect to the role of the library and of the librarian? Knowledge is very social, and needs the right kind of social environment in which to flourish. Knowledge management strategies should emphasise the creation of an environment or culture, which fosters knowledge sharing. These cultural aspects are particularly important in countries, organisations and associations where access to, or investment in, information technology is limited. However, even where the technology infrastructure is sophisticated, the importance of developing the social and cultural aspects of knowledge exchange cannot be overemphasised.

6.2 The most frequent questions which a knowledge management programme seeks to address usually include:

- ? How do I know what I know?
- ? How do I find learning and experience?
- ? How do I evolve a collection of knowledge assets and tools which I can reuse?
- ? How do I innovate using effective approaches from unexpected sources?
- ? How do I make sure that knowledge and insight are disseminated thoughtfully?

6.3 There are four very typical ways in which organisations try to respond to these questions, and in each case there is an active and important role for the librarian to play:

- ? Guides and directories
- ? Skills and attitude
- ? Technology and learning transfer
- ? Networks and social spaces

6.3.1 Guides and Directories

In almost all knowledge management programmes a starting point is to develop a kind of map or guide to expertise, resources and processes. This can be extremely useful in making visible pockets of expertise and experience which might otherwise be very hard to find. It is also a good way for any library or knowledge team to find areas of good practice.

One good example is the librarian for the Open University in Britain, who deliberately plays an active role in developing databases of course materials and work by members of the faculty. She helps by introducing individuals in different faculties to each other where parallel work is being done or where she thinks there may be common interests. Another example is the librarian of the Knowledge Management Unit in British Trade Partners (formerly the Department of Trade and Industry), who is developing a directory of expertise by working together with the other librarians in the organisation.

Another example comes from our own early experiences in 1997. Sparknow once worked with the librarian in a bank to develop a directory called 'The Green Book' – a kind of travellers guide to help individuals in a global investment bank to find and exchange expertise and experience. This is a project which is now often

referred to in the literature of knowledge management. Individual experts could be included in the guide in one of two ways:

1. People who volunteered to be represented in this for specialist expertise of some kind (e.g. country, product, technical or sector expertise);
2. Individuals could also have an entry if they would volunteer to act as a kind of local guide to the expertise and resources in their business unit. These local guides were known as 'knowledge co-ordinators'. The metaphor we used to describe their role was an extension of the idea of a 'travellers guide' – the co-ordinators were seen as navigators.

The full case study is available from Sparknow. A brief summary of the underlying principles can be found in the appendices.

The role of the librarian in developing a guide like this can be critical to its success. The librarian is often the first port of call when somebody is trying to find something out and so might be in a position to introduce experts to each other, because their informal networks can often be very extensive. It is also worth noting that the librarian can play an important neutral role – people might ask the librarian something where they would hesitate to approach each other directly. Also, the librarian can use their information skills to take the lead in developing resource guides and processes which will help to refresh them and keep them up to date. The role of the librarian can highlight knowledge gaps and therefore provide insight into areas of skills development and learning.

6.3.2. Skills and Attitude

A second component of most knowledge management programmes is an investment in coaching and training people in new skills and approaches. In many organisations there can be quite a high level of fear about asking for help, and being seen to be ignorant. There may even be a lack of awareness about how to go about asking for help. With new technologies and fragmented organisational structures, there is also a great lack of knowledge about how to structure and store documents and reports so that they can be easily accessible to others.

In the context of a knowledge society, many teenagers or university students are now keyboard literate, but have no skills in conducting a sensible search or using such techniques as Boolean logic. They might be described as keyboard literate, but information illiterate. The fast-changing information environment is also increasing the emphasis on the need for lifelong learning, a move away from the classroom and towards learning resource centres for non-teacher based learning.

Librarians have been trained in a variety of research techniques and know how to question a wide range of sources to find answers. They also have the training in how to order, summarise and catalogue documents so that well organised repositories can be made available. Because of their training in these areas, librarians can play a very active role in providing coaching, training and support in developing both the formal skills base and the informal values round information and knowledge sharing and storing which are critical to organisations in the 21st century.

6.3.3. Technology and Learning Transfer

One of the greatest challenges which any organisation faces is learning the lessons from their successes and failures and making sure that these are recorded or

passed on in a way that they can be useful to others. This might be the transfer of formal technologies and techniques, or the communication of the more 'invisible' insights which are developed during the lifecycle of a project.

Librarians can offer their skills in evaluation exercises, using classification techniques to spot patterns and identify some of the insights which are often hard to see in the formal project documentation. Such skills might be particularly relevant in the context of Omanisation, the transfer of know-how and experience from external and international experts and organisations to an Omani workforce.

6.3.4. Social spaces and networks

The fourth major component of most knowledge management programmes revolves around acknowledging the importance of informal networks and social spaces. The development of a knowledge-friendly environment, and in providing physical and technological tools will encourage collaboration and sharing. Sometimes we work with people to develop rules, processes and technologies for developing Learning or Knowledge Networks. The physical space which the library or the knowledge team inhabits can be developed to attract specialists, experts and outsiders to drop by and use the facilities. In doing so, they may pick up rich insights from exhibits and journals which are available, or they may run into somebody from whom they will learn something valuable. Or they may be able to draw on the advice and expertise of the librarians.

A good example is the library run by Dr Frank Ryan at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in London. He has made sure that the library is very central, and right next to the cafe. To make extra sure that the library is inviting, he has put up notices in it which say 'Please eat over our books.'

Sparknow has done work on social spaces and networks with a medical research fund which has an excellent and well known library. They transformed the space next to the library from a bookshop into a bookshop/cafe and have marketed the combined library and bookshop/cafe in innovative ways with book launches and events. The aim is to encourage those from their extended network who help them to develop policy, or who come on their leadership courses, to feel as though the space belongs to them as well as to the people who work there. This seems to be working very well and has encouraged much more lively informal debate, alongside the formal activities of the fund.

Many organisations including British Customs and Excise and the UK Countryside Agency are actively developing the role of the library spaces as knowledge spaces for both formal work, and informal encounter.

7. GROUP WORK

7.1 See appendix i for the paper considered by the eight groups, which were randomly selected and seated together for the entire morning. The students also participated in this project but did not prepare flip charts. The flip charts, summarised in this paper, were put up for each group to see.

7.2 We asked the groups to discuss and address four main questions

- ? What are your key **resources**?
- ? Who are your key **audiences**?
- ? What/with whom are your key **alliances**, partnerships and networks?
- ? What are the main **obstacles** to finding or sharing knowledge, or promoting library resources?

7.3 It seemed important to combine the framework of a specific set of questions with guidance about how to work together. To achieve this, we annotated the set of questions with a note:

There are not right or wrong answers to these questions. Please feel free to treat them as a way of sharing experiences, ideas and suggestions in such a way that they can be used as a basis to formulate strategies and approaches. Stories, illustrations, anecdotes are all useful as well as general headings or specific names and details.

This was commented on by several participants as a useful prompt to encourage individuals to be more confident in offering ideas and thoughts to be explored.

7.4 Summary of flip charts:

Resources. As can be seen from the resources listed, Oman possesses sophisticated and varied resources. Not every library has everything but in general libraries were set up in the last two decades and therefore have access to modern library systems and technology. Most librarians are trained in librarianship and therefore users are offered a range of services comparable to many colleges in the UK.

Audiences. The main users of the resources are college students. Although the public has been listed, only the Public Technical Library and the Islamic Library in Ruwi, run by the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, are truly available. University and college premises are not easy to enter and in general outside visitors need permission to access those libraries. Institutional libraries, such as those in ministries will serve their employees.

Alliances. This list gives a basic outline of which organisations libraries most relate to. It is not possible to give a reliable analysis here of how many alliances are maintained on a regular basis.

Obstacles. This clearly emphasises the need for networks and more training and accessibility for the population in Oman. Training for library users, which is not carried out at school, is a major issue. This list also reflects the isolation many librarians feel.

The session did not have time to explore strategies for dealing with the obstacles, however, one interesting example of a cross-cutting activity did emerge. At SQU, those students whose English needs improving must complete a project, which demonstrates that they have enough English to complete their course work. Part of this is to demonstrate knowledge of how to use the library. In looking for ways to tackle the obstacles, it will be equally effective for librarians and information providers to look for strategies and approaches from their own experiences, ideas and models of what works well, as to look outside.

<p style="text-align: center;">Resources</p> <p>Human resources Financial resources Staff knowledge and attitudes Expertise in IT and as information consultants Use of space/ambiance Relevant resource or guide Print and non-print media including monographs, journals, reports, literature, theses, dissertations etc Printed materials Audiovisual materials Internet, email Tools – bibliographic indexes and abstracts, online catalogues, access to external databases (online or CDRoms) Teaching aids, slides Computerised library system Activities, events and communications – promotion of books and various media, displays, informing heads of departments</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Audiences</p> <p>Special interest groups and relevant authorities SQU – faculty, students, staff Users from outside SQU – e.g. from government departments, ministries, private establishment, other colleges, special libraries etc Society Professionals and non-professionals Researchers, academics, trainees (professionals) Public users and casual readers (society) Elementary and secondary students Parents Nursing students, paramedic students, qualified nurses, faculty members, medical students, doctors College students, Ministry of Education students Book publishers and suppliers</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Alliances</p> <p>Need for library/knowledge group in Oman with private and government members With whom (SQU libraries, other libraries from outside campus) SQU admin, college faculty, student community CIS (Centre for information studies) CET (Centre for Education Technology) Ministries Colleges Public institutes Information suppliers (books, journals, databases) Gulf and overseas libraries/information centres Decision makers, vendors and suppliers Agencies such as UNESCO, British Council etc</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Obstacles</p> <p>Lack of coordination Weak cooperation with ministries, other libraries and private companies Limited number of public libraries Lack of expertise Need for public library to (link) share knowledge Lack of time Lack of use of the resources Lack of library skills (students) Lack of new technologies (Internet) Lack of communication among librarians Attitude of administration Lack of resources Lack of library and information skills Working in isolation Censorship Librarian Language Miscommunication Lack of nationwide networking Lack of organisation that inhibits cooperation and coordinating, no networking, absence of professional association where information specialists/librarians could meet to share knowledge and exchange ideas and experiences. At the local level, if more and more student assignments are designed in a way that it becomes mandatory for students to use the library resources.</p>

8. SOME KEY ACTIVE ROLES FOR LIBRARIANS

8.1 In other workshops conducted by Sparknow, librarians have chosen to describe themselves in many ways:

information editors, investigators, locators, gatekeepers, drivers, collectors, curators, producers, originators, guides, classifiers, advisers, educators, catalysts, facilitators, partners, standard bearers, researchers, navigators, storytellers....

8.2 One of the challenges in developing the influence of librarians in these roles is that many of the people who used to visit libraries to find resources and information can now gain access to these things from a distance. This provides less opportunity for face-to-face encounter which can lead to the development of a strong bond between librarians and their clients.

8.3 Another challenge is that librarians also have enemies. Very often the information technology team will show no interest in or understanding of the human element of their systems, or not be open to guidance from those with expertise in structuring content and information. Information technologists will claim that the automation of classification and search does away with the need for information specialists when quite the reverse is true because:

- ? The internet has randomly variable quality information, which may well be faulty or out of date, and
- ? The purchasers of electronic information in an organisation will need the guidance of digital librarians to advise on digital library options, upgrades etc, and to provide constant support and retraining.

8.4 Oman has a trained cadre of librarians operating at many levels and within public institutions. This resource should be harnessed by Oman to be proactive in developing a knowledge society. One of the aims of the lecture/workshop was to encourage librarians to look at how they can develop that role for themselves.

8.5 They possess a range of skills, including:

- ? guidance and navigation
- ? teaching - skills and attitude - skills for a technologically advanced and knowledge society very much the skills of a librarian
- ? creating social context
- ? recording and ordering

8.6 Mark Field, a professional advisor at The Library Association articulated the following points for Omani librarians to help define the role of libraries in a knowledge society:

Library as ...

- ? a declaration of commitment to thought and exploration of ideas (totem),
- ? a substantial gateway to the universe of knowledge (space + librarian).
- ? a map of the universe of knowledge,
- ? an experience, individual declares to self ' I am exploring',
- ? a method of purposive exploration,
- ? a way to carry out random exploration,
- ? a catalyst for ideas into society,
- ? freedom, an ethic of access without question

9. THE IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKS

9.1 As referred to above, the lack of a professional association means that Omani librarians do not have a natural forum for discussion. There is no newsletter, no annual conference, no regular chapter meetings, no social gathering nor a steering committee of senior librarians. This last lack is significant because there is no collective interface with government, the ministries and the HE sector.

9.2 Librarians are free to become members of library associations and the most frequently joined institution is the Special Libraries Association, Gulf Chapter, which is an American institution which holds Gulf chapter meetings annually, rotating through Gulf countries. The association addresses all issues, including innovations, equipment and training. It was last held in Oman in 1999.

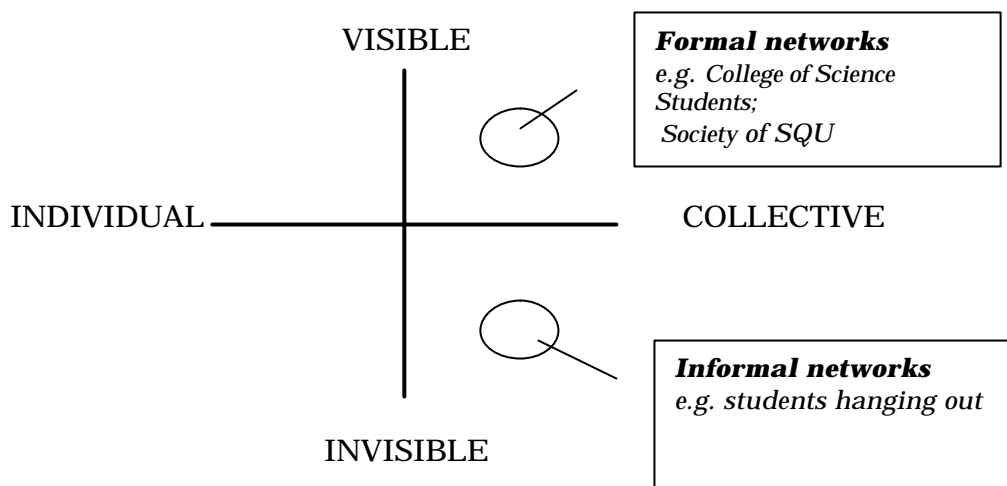
9.3 Libraries in Oman are valued and the staff is given training, often taking masters degrees at overseas universities. However, there is no national policy on developing libraries.

9.4 As this exercise demonstrated in several ways, networks are essential for the development of a knowledge society in Oman, in order to:

- ? Develop specialist cadres to use the knowledge already existing in Oman
- ? Share knowledge already gained by individuals through academic research and publishing
- ? Enable libraries to be more pro-active and entrepreneurial in their work
- ? Enable industry to benefit from existing research
- ? Maintain a regional network which in turn supports Oman's national policies
- ? Support the new universities coming on stream.

9.5 The World Development Report of the World Bank (1998) states that 'knowledge is accumulated almost exclusively within networks, trade groups and trade associations'. **Librarians can play an active role in developing and supporting such networks.** Therefore librarians need interactive opportunities with their colleagues. As referred to in the section on Knowledge Management,

librarians are the natural authors of guides and effective librarians will facilitate the development of skills and nurture positive attitudes. These have been summed up by Dave Snowden of IBM, as creating conditions of 'Curiosity, naivety and trust.'



9.6 The British Government has paid particular attention to this need for Knowledge Networks. One initiative, called the Knowledge Network, run by the Cabinet Office, is developing links between librarians and others to provide briefing materials to a pool which Ministers can draw on at all hours of the day and night. Other pan government organisations include the Committee of Departmental Librarians, and The Circle of State Librarians. These bodies have influences and roles in consultation for projects, as does the Library Association in Britain.

9.7 Librarians and information professionals in government departments and other agencies or associations often play an active role in strengthening links between departments. Information professionals make efforts to network and share knowledge with other colleagues, either through formal Service Level Agreements, or more informally, whether it be through SLAs or informally. Many departments also take on pre-library school candidates and offer the Library Association chartership routes as encouragement to facilitate further learning and professional development. Further information on the role of librarians in developing a knowledge society in Britain can be obtained from the Library Association.

9.8 Individual agencies, such as the Countryside Agency and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority are actively developing knowledge management strategies and knowledge and learning networks, and would be useful case studies for the Omani ministries, university and librarians to pay attention to in formulating an approach for Oman.

9.9 Other sources of insight will be the development of the role of university libraries in leading academic institutions, particularly in Europe and the US. Professor Clive Holtham from City University Business School in London is a particular expert in this area. One case study he recommends is the George Mason University in the US where the library and the refectory have been merged.

10 HISTORY, TRADITION AND LANGUAGE

Oman is a country rich in culture and heritage with its roots deep in history. Omanis have always been proud of what has been accomplished in the past and passed traditions on from generation to generation. In order to safeguard our heritage through changing times it is our duty to preserve all aspects of culture and tradition. By doing so we provide forthcoming generations the chance to observe and research them.
(HE Mohammad Al Zubair, founder of Bait Al Zubair Museum)

- 10.1 It is useful to conclude by re-emphasising the importance of history and tradition as the context for any knowledge management developments. We have already mentioned the importance of metaphor in conveying, or developing shared understanding round, difficult abstract ideas. The World Bank report emphasises the importance of drawing on tradition in developing new approaches and it is certainly true that we have found story, history and metaphor to be important ways to develop shared understanding and commitment. Indeed traditional forms of knowledge storage and exchange such as librarianship, stories and apprenticeship are becoming increasingly recognised in many knowledge programmes. It will be important, as knowledge and knowledge management develops in Omani institutions to consider appropriate metaphors which come from the best part of its history, traditions and rituals. Examples which could help audiences make connections with ideas might be of the development of navigation tools, or knowledge as fuel, both of which have roots in ancient and recent Omani history. Perhaps when thinking about informal networks, the idea of the majlis would translate this effectively into the Omani context.
- 10.2 This approach to rooting new activities in a historic context may also yield insights into practices in Omani society which are probably taken for granted, but which may be excellent methods for creating and sharing knowledge.
- 10.3 Another consideration is the role of museums, collections, archaeological finds and other such ways of treasuring objects and artefacts and making them touchstones of knowledge. It is vital that these institutions are not static and that they disseminate their scholarship. The Bait Al Zubair Museum plays a vital role in the Omani and international community through research, loans, exhibitions, education and collaboration. Its work addresses cross-cultural issues that expand the visitors' knowledge. Some of the British public sector organisations and universities are starting to explore the active role that collections can play in knowledge management. One example is the museum for British Customs and Excise, which is undertaking an oral history project, to record the stories told by retired officers and develop a collection from this.

11. Conclusion

- 11.1 This event is intended to be the first event of a series for the British Council Librarians Network, to enable and empower the network to raise issues from within and to innovate where they can within their institutions. The impetus for this event came from an informal survey of members of the network who put issues such as globalisation and information technology forward. Other issues were how to promote the use of facilities within the libraries and how to make libraries a national asset. A further concern, which was voiced later, was that librarians would be sidelined once the Internet is fully accessible in Oman. Thus the event was also intended to show librarians that although their roles will change, they will be more necessary than ever in Oman's future.
- 11.2 The attendance was very encouraging as the lecture was held during working hours and therefore institutions had to release people for almost the whole day. Many people travelled from outside Muscat and were pleased to have been asked. Many students from the library school attended and the head of department has offered to take an active role in disseminating this paper.
- 11.3 The various sectors, medical, legal, scientific etc, have many highly trained librarians who could now form network subgroups. The university library at SQU already has outside contacts that regularly ask for information and its expertise is highly regarded.
- 11.4 With the production of this paper and the involvement of Sparknow and other associated organisations, Oman's librarians have the foundation of a strong network, which should be taken forward in conjunction with the British Council, in order to strengthen Oman's economic future. The intellectual capacity of the country is not in doubt. The librarians network can only enhance and foster this essential resource for the 21st century.
- 11.5 In summary, the box below gives some useful prompts to keep the ideas of knowledge and how it permeates society and how it can be used to improve it.

Knowledge is...

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">? in people's heads – information needs people and their insight and experience to bring timeliness, judgement or interpretation. (This is sometimes called 'tacit' or 'implicit' knowledge.)? an awareness of what you do not know, and of ways to find information that you need from different sources, whether these are books and journals, the internet or other people's experiences.? dependent on context and experience – e.g. how do you know how to perform an operation? To provide patients with the right medical care?? very specific to the moment. But often it has most value when put in a new context which exposes some unexpected application and challenges current perception. This kind of development of knowledge involves high levels of creativity.? of little value unless it is put to work? a combination of visible and invisible, formal and informal experiences, analysis and guidelines. |
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Appendix i – The Questioning Framework

SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

CONTEXT

In your conversations and debates, please bear in mind four objectives:

1. promoting library facilities;
2. creating a knowledge environment in a university/college;
3. exploiting the intellectual capital and expertise of people in Oman as a national asset; and
4. developing the active role of the librarian and information provider in promoting a knowledge society.

QUESTIONS

1. What are your key resources? (i.e. what are the main tools, assets and expertise of the library and the librarian/information provider)
2. Who are your key audiences? (I.e. visitors, users, those you wish to influence, suppliers)
3. What/with whom are your key alliances, partnerships and networks? (E.g. with other libraries, with ministries, faculties, external experts)
4. What are the main obstacles to finding or sharing knowledge, or promoting library resources?

NOTE

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Please feel free to treat them as a way of sharing experiences, ideas and suggestions in such a way that they can be used as a basis to formulate strategies and approaches. Stories, illustrations, anecdotes are all useful as well as general headings or specific names and details.

Victoria Ward
19th February 2001

OMAN – questions handout – feb01
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Appendix ii – Issues for setting up a successful network

- ? **Human contact** - how often, if ever, does the network need to physically meet? How else do they communicate meaningfully?
- ? **Faith and trust:** how do you ensure that people believe in what the network is doing and contribute to it?
- ? **Ownership:** how do you create this among network members? How do you create a sense of connection and motivate members to contribute?
- ? **Time and track record:** how long does it take for the network to become established and for participants to trust in it? How do you keep momentum over time?
- ? **Size:** how big can the network be and still be manageable? Does this change over time? Can one have smaller networks within the network?
- ? **Technology:** how do you manage a 'virtual' network? What benefits and disadvantages does new technology bring?
- ? **Rituals:** how can you create or use them?
- ? **Administration:** who makes the final decisions? Who controls the budget? How do you keep the practical side of things going?
- ? **Language:** what effects can choice of language have on communication within the network? How do you deal with misinterpretations due to cultural difference, or the perceived connotation of certain words or terms?

Derived from a framework developed by Daisy Froud for the London International Festival of Theatre Business Arts Forum

Appendix iii. Mapping. Setting up an expertise directory – guiding principles

The following guidelines are taken from the Knowledge Management Project and NatWest Markets, 1997. Guidelines for the “Green Book,” The Rough Guide to NatWest Markets.

1. The Green Book is about active exchange of knowledge; a tool to help people trade in valuable information. It is about giving and getting of knowledge that will enhance the competitive edge of the firm.
2. It is unhierarchical. There are no titles in it, only guides to whom can provide what expertise and experience.
3. Contributors need to define the key characteristics of their area and their knowledge objectives; what do they want to give (experts, documents, case studies, ideas); what do they need to get (ideas, contacts, expertise).
4. It is a navigational tool/handbook designed for individuals to find their way quickly to the relevant knowledge, expertise, and experience that exists within the firm. It does not provide information itself.
5. In order to make navigation effective, contributors need to identify knowledge coordinators who will act as navigators/signposts to the experts, expertise, documents and case studies in the area, and who will stimulate the accumulation of information in central knowledge banks (ensuring the guide is kept up to date, information in databases is refreshed, promoting the uptake and continued use of knowledge sharing tools).
6. People may be represented in several communities within the guide – in industry sector, geographic area, product, supporting tools and facilitation.
7. The structure is intuitive rather than organisational. Information is indexed according to functional, practical groupings rather than organisationally defined structures.

The Green Book is a constantly evolving directory, which over time will reflect the feedback and input of users.

Appendix iv – further reading and resources

- Boisot, Max, *Knowledge Assets: Securing Competitive Advantage in the Information Economy* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998)
- Dawson, Ross, *Developing Knowledge-Based Client Relationships: The Future of Professional Services* (Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford 2000)
- Denning, Steven, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford 2000)
- Holtham, Clive, various materials. See in particular Clive's homepage at www.staff.city.ac.uk/~sf329/space.htm
- Libraries Association, contact www.la-hq.org.uk
- Markus, Thomas, *Knowledge and Power* (Routledge Kegan Paul, London 1833)
- Orna, Elizabeth, *Practical Information Policies* (Gower, London 1999)
- Prusak, Larry and Davenport, Tom, *Working Knowledge: How Organisations Manage What they Know* (Harvard Business School Press, Boston 1998)
- Snowden, David et al., *Liberating Knowledge*, sponsored by IBM Global Services and the CBI (Caspian Publishing, London 1999)
- Sparknow materials and Sparkpress publications, contact sparkteam@sparknow.net
- Sparknow submission to The Government's Competitiveness White Paper 'Our Competitive Future: Building the Knowledge Driven Economy,' December 1998
- Sparkteam, *Corporania (The Treasure Map) – using stories, storytelling and narrative in effecting transition*, (Sparkpress, London 2001)
- TFPL report 'Skills for Knowledge Management: building a knowledge economy,' September 1999. Available to purchase from TFPL (www.tfpl.com)
- The World Bank, *Knowledge and Resources for Development* by World Bank 1998 (www.worldbank.org and search using the term 'knowledge')
- Weick, Karl, *Sensemaking in Organisations – Foundations for Organizational Science* (Sage Publications, California 1995)
- Wenger, Etienne, *Communities of Practice – Learning, Meaning and Identity* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998)

Appendix v – the sponsoring organisations

The British Council.

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for education and cultural relations. Our aim is to create enduring partnerships between British and other cultures by creating opportunities to connect with the latest skills, ideas and experience from the UK.

Sparknow Limited.

Sparknow, founded in October 1997, advises on and researches knowledge and information management, communications and internal brand management, change and transition. In particular we seek to use traditional forms such as librarianship, apprenticeship, stories, markets and exchanges as vehicles of knowledge storage and exchange. Our clients are a balance of public, private and voluntary sector organisations.

Sultan Qaboos University.

The objective of the SQU library system is to provide the university community with the best possible library resources needed to carry out teaching and research effectively.