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## Leveraging the Skills of the Corporate Special Librarian to Enhance the Perceived Value of Information and Sustain Communities of Practice

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# Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship



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## Leveraging the Skills of the Corporate Special Librarian to Enhance the Perceived Value of Information and Sustain Communities of Practice

Patricia Margulies

### Abstract

An assessment is made of a fairly recent commitment by many business and governmental organizations to take a strategic look at 'organizational knowledge,' its origins and its management. Based on their activities and findings to identify, capture, and disseminate organizational knowledge, the paper describes how the Information Resource Center (IRC) and its special librarians can ensure the enterprise's knowledge and information goals are met while heightening the IRC's own intrinsic organizational value and profile.

This paper argues for major participation by the IRC and its special librarians in communities of practice (COPs). Such IRC participation is viewed as a critical success factor for the enterprise's investment in communities. Special librarians can manage the mandatory content (reference resources, packaged tacit knowledge, technical and process information) as well as organize the other content-related aspects of the community delivering support to mine, refine, and disseminate knowledge, and most significantly, make connections among subject matter experts and the community of practice. Such alignment of the IRC as a fundamental support mechanism for COPs will provide quantifiable value for the IRC as it demonstrates linkage to the enterprise's mission. Communities of Practice enable the enterprise's core competencies and the special librarian is a critical necessity for COP performance and value.

### Introduction

Most current discussions of professional librarians regardless of their setting and focus—public, academic or special—usually conclude that the library profession is no

longer perceived as valuable in the end-user or patrons' collective thoughts and that many lay people feel they can independently search and retrieve information via the Internet that satisfies their individual information requirements. The line of discussion then continues, noting that most individuals using the Internet are likely unaware of the potential differences in quality of the retrieved information or that the data/information they find may well be less than adequate. While this argument undoubtedly is true, the majority of lay individuals will continue to use the Internet, perform their own searches, and select their own results. That majority will only grow in number as children raised on the Internet reach their adult years, go to college, and are employed in knowledge industries—which includes nearly any business or other venture in today's global economy (Brown and Duguid, 1998).

Librarians know they cannot simply wring their collective hands in despair despite the reality of this situation and librarian-focused literature identifies various methods that librarians and libraries can use to communicate and market their professional skills and capabilities. Librarians must continue to meet their objectives of supporting and in fact enhancing search, retrieval and understanding through the synthesis of information, and must also participate in active outreach and communication. Methods include harnessing the Internet for libraries and providing improved access by the public to librarians via mature online software tools (i.e. email, forms, chat) thus taking advantage of the convenience of online access and eliminating for many the necessity to visit a library's physical space. Other options to improve public perception and library value include emphasizing information literacy training and providing pathfinders and other search and retrieval tools. Finally, the advice repeatedly stresses the necessity for librarians to be prepared to prove (quantify) value and communicate (market) their solutions in order to raise their skill, talent and offerings' perceived value.

There are other courses of action that libraries and librarians can take to improve their linkage to whatever institution, organization, or population they serve. For public librarians, the ideas presented in this paper may be used in relationship to the specific community served by the library (i.e. a demographic alignment); for academic libraries, the ideas presented may be used to target specific goals of the academic and research staff. The focus of this paper, however, is on the special library or Information Resource Center (IRC) that lives within a larger institutional setting, where the IRC is not a core competency of the institution and in fact may be fighting today for its prestige, if not its very survival.

This paper describes the related concepts of knowledge management (KM), communities of practice (COP), organizational knowledge and strategic information management (IM), the benefits of which are under investigation and adaptation today by many leading organizations. Why and how the special librarians of the

organization's IRC can participate is discussed and in particular, a valuable and critical role for librarians within communities of practice is described.

## **Organizational Knowledge**

Enterprises have long defined their primary asset as their people. The products that an enterprise produces are often identified as the know-what of the enterprise, but the skills and competencies of the workforce are the know-how. The ability for one organization to out-perform another relative to cycle time, customer alignment, quality, and cost is likely due less to the know-what than to the know-how.

How individuals in the workforce learn processes, gain skills, and understand their place in the enterprise has been the purview of training organizations and many volumes of management literature. The understanding, however, that enterprises themselves generate and own knowledge is relatively new and even newer is the focus on the overt and proactive management of that knowledge, the capture and sharing of practices and employee methods, the identification and assessment of information flows, and the management of an environment to create emergent knowledge from which new products and services can be derived (Brown and Duguid, 1998; Nonaka and Konno, 1998).

In order to manage know-how, the enterprise must understand what it is and its origins. Throughout knowledge management (KM) literature, the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge is discussed (Anand *et al.*, 1998; Choo, 2000; Nonaka and Konno, 1998; Stover, 2003). Tacit knowledge within an organization is the personal knowledge that individuals have about their job, their leadership, their environment and organizational culture. It grows over time and largely through interactions with co-workers and others in the workplace environment. Tacit knowledge increases through doing and experiencing and it is most often highly specific to the environment and circumstances at hand. Thus, tacit knowledge is not necessarily transferable outside of the environment that generated it since so much of that tacit knowledge is involved with 'how we do it here.' Tacit knowledge is the foundation of an enterprise's core competencies.

Tacit knowledge tends to be nearly impossible to document or teach through regular forms of classroom (often unidirectional) training. Highest value tacit knowledge is nuanced and described through characteristics likely unseen by those with less specific knowledge. But, in spite of the complexity of documenting or otherwise nailing down tacit knowledge, it is transferred all the time through observation, apprenticeship, and discussion among colleagues.

Such transfer of tacit knowledge is sometimes identified as knowledge conversion.

Knowledge resides in the minds of individuals, and this personal knowledge needs to be converted into knowledge that can be shared and transferred into innovations. During knowledge creation, the main information process is the conversion of knowledge (Choo, 1996).

Because of the demonstrated value of sharing tacit knowledge, enterprises are embarking on proactive methods to encourage information exchange – through after action reviews, procedural lessons learned discussions, and even storytelling. The most potentially valuable activity for leveraging tacit knowledge that enterprises are tackling today, however, is the establishment of the community of practice (COP) model.

Explicit knowledge includes the know-what of the organization and is often described as its intellectual assets or intellectual property.

Explicit knowledge codified as intellectual assets are valuable to the organization because they add to the organization's observable and tradable stocks of knowledge. Moreover, because they have been committed to media, ideas may be communicated more easily (Choo, 2000).

Within the organizational setting we are describing, the special librarians of the IRC possess tacit knowledge of their own based on their years of training and experience. These tacit knowledge capabilities are critical to the enterprise and include selection and search/retrieval of information resources, the know-how to assess and articulate information needs, and the capability to evaluate the quality of information. In addition, the special librarians are also tacitly in-tune with the corporate culture, its leadership and vision. "Most of the time, this know-how is transparent to the organization or hidden beneath the surface of day-to-day work" (Chun, 2000).

The special librarians' tacit knowledge and skill sets are used today to manage a subset of the organization's explicit knowledge. Librarians may perform the role of infomediator with subject matter experts to conduct value audits, identify new collection requirements, and improve access and retrieval. Most often, they react to individual requests for information and resources. Immersion in strategic IM and communities of practice will offer librarians an opportunity to expand their organizational role and deliver enhanced value to the enterprise.

## **Strategic Information Management**

As Choo (1996) noted, without an understanding of how the enterprise creates, transforms and uses its information, that enterprise has no ability to manage and sustain its information management processes, information resources, or information

technology. Information is used strategically in an enterprise for sense-making in the environment, as a point of generation of new knowledge for product, service, or process innovation, and as the foundation for ongoing decision-making throughout the workforce (Choo, 1996). Once an enterprise catches on to the value of operational (transactional) data for trending and other analyses to improve processes and customer/supplier/partner relationships, the next tier is to begin harnessing the tacit knowledge of the enterprise, estimated at over 75% of any enterprise's information cache. What ultimately matters, however, is not the capture, storage or organization of this information and knowledge, but rather the enterprise's ability to interpret it for competitive advantage (North *et al.*, 2004). Strategic information management acknowledges the need to understand and combine explicit data, information and tacit knowledge – each a point of leverage for the enterprise

For the enterprise to receive value from strategic information management initiatives, serious assessment of what information is considered valuable (for today and for tomorrow), how to organize it, who needs to see it, and who cannot see it are each key decisions that must be made (Lang, 2001). Within the enterprise, no one is better suited for these tasks than the IRC and its special librarians.

Knowledge managers must go beyond creating informational repositories that take knowledge to be a 'thing,' toward supporting the whole social and technical ecology in which knowledge is retained and created (Peltonen and Lamsa, 2004).

The basic objectives (North *et al.*, 2004) for strategic information management include the following -- easily seen to be within the professional (and tacit knowledge!) purview of an enterprise's special librarians:

- Leverage information for maximum effectiveness throughout the organization
- Protect information
- Monitor its use
- Quantify its value
- Forecast future needs
- Maintain select information for legal or long-term access

Identifying special librarians and the IRC as part of the support staff to enable COPs to become 'real' to their membership and valuable to the enterprise is indeed part of an enterprise's strategic information management deliberation – at the community level. In fact, by tackling organizational knowledge community-by-community, an enterprise has some likelihood of success – simply smaller bites of the elephant. Of course, strategic information management dictates that each community works within a predefined organizational or classification schema (a taxonomy), adopts a subset of metadata tags, and incorporates controlled vocabularies so that over time there is the

potential for shared resource value throughout the enterprise and not merely the establishment of community-level information silos.

Special librarians should not bound their work efforts and enterprise significance to only the ‘static’ resources of the enterprise but rather evolve toward enabling communities—those factories for expertise identification, competency-transfer, knowledge creation, and thereby competitive advantage.

The management of knowledge as a static stock disregards the essential dimension of knowledge creation. Managing emergent knowledge ... requires a different sort of leadership. Top management must come to the realization that knowledge must be nurtured, supported, enhanced and cared for (Nonaka and Konno, 1998).

### **The Knowledge Cycle**

As enterprises became interested in proactively managing their knowledge, a set of models, concepts, and vocabulary grew and were incorporated into the umbrella term of ‘knowledge management.’ Knowledge management (KM) projects and studies have identified a set of tools (systems, processes, behaviors) for overt and proactive management of organizational knowledge. The selection of any one tool over another can only be made with a solid understanding of the enterprise’s culture and its vision of the future. There is neither cookie-cutter methodology nor software that can shape different enterprises toward the same result. Different tools support different types of workers and those that design KM initiatives have to ensure ‘fit’ between the KM solution (usually delivered as a combination of people, content and technology) and the workforce and customer base. KM is grounded in the belief that organizations know more than they may be aware of knowing and that leverage of internal and external insights (organizational knowledge) can have benefit throughout the total entity, beyond classification, group, department, site, or other artificial boundary that often impedes the flow of information and knowledge.

KM research is based on or includes theories of knowledge creation and the learning organization. These theories are not discussed in detail here but, as described by Peltonen and Lamsa,

...[do] foster the idea that existing skills and habits can be utilized thru the unleashing of the potential embedded in tacit views of employees... [Learning and knowledge creation are] natural emergent processes of sense-making and interaction ... (Peltonen and Lamsa, 2004)

Knowledge management was first put into play by global consulting firms (Mentzas *et al.*, 2001) who recognized that their only ‘product’ was the knowledge and insight of

their consulting staff. These consulting firms experienced the same negative pressure of all large global institutions. Different individuals and teams serving the same customer entities tended to step on each other's proverbial toes and employees knew that someone, somewhere knew an answer that they did not. The firms needed to ensure that the right advice was given for the right problems and that such advice was designed and delivered with consistent value from the perspective of the customer. How could these consulting firms leverage specialty knowledge beyond one individual, to all members of the organization and how could these consulting firms ensure that all components (individuals or small teams) serving any given customer, had the same experience, insight, and information resources? Only through managing the 'product' of the consulting firm—its tacit and explicit organizational knowledge—could the consulting firms prosper.

Many of the firms that early-on committed to knowledge management techniques also provided insight on these internal activities to their customers and 'knowledge management' became not only an internal improvement method, but also a productized solution offering. Although there are various descriptions of the knowledge management cycle found in the literature, the basic steps include the following.

1. Identify, acquire, create, or otherwise capture knowledge
2. Document, refine, and edit knowledge so that local knowledge takes on relevance and significance beyond its genesis
3. Organize this knowledge for awareness, access, retrieval and use by others
4. Package, publish and distribute the knowledge via the organization's portal, pre-identified information flow models, conferences and other mechanisms
5. Manage the information and knowledge to track its usage and user populations; sunset information and knowledge that has served its purpose

Today, the IRC is supremely competent to perform steps 1 through 3—this is what librarians do, albeit most often in response to individual inquiries for information and focused on explicit information/knowledge. Improving the perceived value of the IRC, enhancing the value (benefit) of information, and enabling the enterprise's quest to grow and improve through strategic information management are the anticipated outcomes of the IRC's expansion of presence throughout the entire knowledge cycle as well as in the IRC's interaction with not just individual patrons, but to communities. The librarian skill sets identify value, determine information supplier relations, create organizational and taxonomy schema, measure reuse, generate the environment for reflection and learning (Choo, 2000). Recommended steps to refashion the IRC to deliver direct and critical support to COPs are discussed in the "Special Librarians Role ..." section of this paper.



## Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are important to the functioning of any organization, but they become crucial to those that recognize knowledge as a key asset (Peltonen and Lamsa, 2004).

Within that toolkit of KM methodologies and activities is the Community of Practice. As with the majority of KM 'tools,' communities have always existed. Most grew from the ground up as individuals with a shared interest in certain topics and subjects learned of each other's existence. The members identified the need to communicate and collaborate among each other and, over time, may have formalized community existence. What is new today, is that enterprises—believing in the existence of organizationally-held knowledge, its potential value, and the enterprise's ability to nurture emergent knowledge—are investing in communities' creation. Communities perform as a factory producing organizational knowledge—they deliver the social processes and environment for the creation of knowledge, its conversion and its transfer.

Knowledge creation is achieved through a recognition of the synergistic relationships between tacit and explicit knowledge in the organization, and thru the design of social processes that create new knowledge by converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge (Choo, 1996).

Communities provide a sense of place (even for remote, virtual, and global organizations) to capture tacit insights, test and refine ideas and theories, communicate with others, improve the value of tacit knowledge and then retain it for the use of colleagues and future colleagues. Leading enterprises identify specific categories of product and customer knowledge as core to the enterprise and then seek ways to leverage the tacit knowledge of the individuals throughout the organization in these core areas. By enabling the growth of communities based around individual know-how and know-what, the organization can ensure that its core competencies are sustained and able to evolve to meet the demands of the future marketplace. If, as organization theorists C.K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel (1990) suggest, an organization is defined in terms of its 'core competencies,' then the constellations of communities of practice that embody these competencies are what gives an organization its identity in terms of what it knows how to do as an organization (Snyder, 1996 quoted in Peltonen and Lamsa, 2004).

The 'communities of practice' terminology was first coined by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave in the early 1990s and viewed largely as an extension of social structures that date back to tribes and artisan guilds. CoPs have proven their value (Ardichvili *et al.*, 2003; Brown and Duguid, 1998; Davenport, 2001; Fisher, 2005; Nonaka and

Konno, 1998; Nyberg, 2001; Smith and Farquar, 2000) especially in large organizations where colleagues may not be aware of other individuals or projects outside their own group, where several company heritages exist and facility locations act as a barrier to the spread of a common culture or business vision, where restructuring is an ongoing phenomenon requiring the breaking of old bonds and building of new, or where partnering with different institutional entities and customers is required for project success. Communities' value within the enterprise setting is premised on optimizing opportunities for tacit knowledge identification and exchange, leverage of explicit information/knowledge and development of an organization-wide vocabulary and partnerships.

Among the chief reasons why communities of practice are different tools for knowledge generation and sharing is the fact that most of a firm's competitive advantage is embedded in the intangible, tacit knowledge of its people, and that competences do not exist apart from the people who develop them (Ardichvili *et al.*, 2003).

If a COP can provide the 'water cooler' experience (where everybody knows everything) once depended upon when organizations were small, change and the marketplace were less dynamic, and individuals were collocated, then COPs can be counted upon as one of the primary antidotes to the loss of organizational knowledge manifested today through mergers and acquisitions; the dynamism of technical change; and, the demographic shift (Baby Boomer retirements and younger workers' interest in heightened job mobility as compared to earlier generations). In addition, COPs provide the mechanism to communicate (spread) technical and process change, new operating vision and ideas, and most importantly customer information that is likely experienced (and thereby learned) by one group only, but must be known to all for true organization value. In fact, online COPs have proven capable of enhancing an enterprise's networking ability by enabling information flows between previously unrelated or weakly related individuals or groups (Ardichvili, *et al.*, 2003).

Communities of Practice encourage knowledge conversion within an organization. Mark Stover notes such characteristics as "...resolution of ambiguity through intentional communities; tacit complicity among employees; informal matrices of relationships among employees; and reliance on collective knowledge" as positive outcomes of the COP organizational knowledge factory.

A community of practice is unlike any other form of organizing model: they are not bound by organization, hierarchy nor official status but rather individual reputation. It is not a project or product team with a start and stop dates and a defined set of deliverables; it is not a department with an explicit hierarchy and definitional set of tasks. Rather it is a largely self-organizing, volunteer collection of individuals

interested in a topic or subject area, who see the benefits in collaboration, who wish to learn more, and who wish to be identified by their colleagues as ‘players’ in the topic space. Communities exist as long as the membership finds value in interaction – interaction with colleagues, with external information and representatives, and with content.

The ideal COP intent can be described akin to “learning” as presented by Lang (2001). She noted that,

Learning is more than acquiring facts and techniques. It involves acquiring a way of looking at the world, of coming to possess that perspective embedded in a particular discipline as background knowledge, everyday practices of that discipline and common wisdom about cause and effect relationships as shared by its practitioners (Lang, 2001).

Within the enterprise, a community can be seeded with content and members as well as enabled by technology and executive championship. Such a COP is dubbed a structured community. The structured COP holds the key to optimizing and leveraging tacit knowledge, the identification and use of appropriate and quality information resources, and the inclusion of an organization’s diverse population, to gear the focus of the COP to current and future organizational issues. As Nonaka and Konno (1998) noted, the overt selection of people “...with the right mix of special knowledge and capabilities ... is critical.” The COP target topics may be product line and customer focused, new markets and technologies focused, or process focused. Regardless of the target, for optimum value the COP must link to the organization’s strategic plan and vision and the COP’s champion must work to ensure support for the COP infrastructure (content, technology, and people). COPs become the mechanism for growing the know-how and know-what of the future in today’s workforce as well as codifying such knowledge for new recruits to speed their informational ramp-up and enhance their efforts on behalf of the enterprise.

### **The Special Librarian’s Role in Strategic IM, KM, and Communities of Practice**

Reviewing the literature, no case studies were found describing an enterprise’s formal insertion of the IRC into the communities of practice (COP) support structure, but visionaries such as Etienne Wenger (a thought leader within the KM sphere) note the natural fit between librarian skills and a COPs need for content (Cox *et al.*, 2003). The literature did identify a number of pilot projects where librarians have formed COPs to support tacit knowledge exchange among themselves (Bailey, 2004; Bhojaraju, 2004; Choo, 2000; Davenport, 2001; Lamont, 2004; St. Clair, 2003; Stoll, 2004; Stover, 2003) but no literature that described an extension of these COPs, beyond the library profession members, was retrieved.

Although KM is claimed by many librarians as a virtual ‘slam dunk’ for the profession, there is no such default ownership of KM by any group and surveys have revealed that senior leadership does not perceive librarians as potential KM leaders (Perez, 1999; Schwarzwald, 1999). Within most organizations, interest in KM from HR, IT, Organizational Development and other groups needs to be leveraged to build a multidisciplinary approach to the very multifaceted KM concept. Within any enterprise, individuals, teams, departments, and skill sets compete for acknowledged ownership (and thereby glory) of cutting edge technologies – seldom is ownership default.

Cox *et al.* (2003), noted above, did describe the Wegner *et al.* recent (2000) work as seeing a role for librarians in Communities of Practice. However, even Cox, using the Wegner insight, continued on to state the following.

If such communities are the key to knowledge creation and transfer, the library profession may be ambitious to increase its skill set to become the natural managers of the community ... At the very least, it would be useful to identify more clearly the role of librarians in educational communities of practice... At the same time it was our perception from library oriented lists that they were heavily oriented toward information exchange and discussion is muted...it could be that core professional values inhibit a stress on discussion and debate, thus weakening their claim to be natural leaders in community building (Cox *et al.*, 2003)

Cox *et al.* further noted that Davenport and Prusak, two additional thought leaders in KM, identified librarians as key brokers of knowledge sharing. In their 1998 publication *Working Knowledge*,

... they recognized the possibility that librarians’ knowledge of who is researching what enables them to connect people in different parts of the organization, in unexpected ways (Cox, et al., 2003).

Stephen Abram (2004), in discussing trends for the ‘next-generation librarian’ includes ideas on collocating library services and “adding librarian tricks to the bricks and clicks.” Abram notes that librarians must go beyond virtual classrooms and chat rooms and that “It’s about ... communities of practice...”

Where the literature connects librarians and KM within enterprises, or librarians and communities of practice, it appears either future oriented (wishful) and even fatalistic (it is granted to us), but nowhere are positive steps identified to cause this linkage between the IRC and the enterprise. Perez (2002), discussing his earlier 1999 article on taking action toward KM notes that he “opined that I’d not seen much evidence of library professional ventures and successes in the KM arena.” Writing in 2000, he

stated that librarians continue to agree among each other that KM is “what we’ve always done.” Perez rejects this notion and states,

This isn’t what we’ve always done. It seems to me that the traditional library approach has been a matter of competent, but fairly introverted, assembly and storage of a knowledge corpus, combined with mastery of good, solid research techniques and encyclopedic knowledge of resources and finding tools. ... We’re missing the point to cling to these old paradigms of information services and delivery methods. KM is about much more than finding our way to existing information records (Perez, 2000). Although Perez’s article describes the communities of practice concept, he too does not take the next step and identify that arena as prime for the special librarian in the role of adjunct, support staff to the COP.

It is critical that communities have a support staff (in addition to executive championship) for a variety of ongoing infrastructure needs. Such a support staff includes information technicians, membership coordinators, skilled facilitators, subject matter experts and knowledge coordinators. The knowledge coordinator, or library role, is identified by Smith (2000) as the support element necessary to “...help employees codify and disseminate information.” The significance of content cannot be overstated – just like ‘location, location, location’ is the mantra of the real estate profession, ‘content is king’ is the truism of communities.

An upfront investment is required to seed the initial knowledge repository. It is difficult if not impossible to convince community members to contribute to an empty shell. Not only must there be content from the launch date, but it must be quality content as well (Smith, 2000).

In engineering vernacular, we would say that while content is necessary, it is not sufficient. Communities are social entities and are empowered through the ‘less is more’ theory such that once information is filtered through the COP’s social network only a component of it needs to be presented. It has been made contextual within and by the community. As Choo (2003) notes, “A piece of information acquires meaning only when it is socially understood.” Moving special librarians directly into communities as the knowledge broker support staff will allow the special librarian to develop (or use any already existing) specialty knowledge as held by the community members and adjust content for its intrinsic, contextual value to the COP and enterprise.

Other skills and professional talents that the special librarians can bring to the role of knowledge coordinator include the organization of materials generated by COP members; creation and evolution of a unifying taxonomy or other classification method for breadth and scope awareness as well as improved resource access;

technical instruction design related to search, retrieval and information quality evaluations; external content (book reviews; news clippings related to partner, competitor, supplier, and customer knowledge); internal content (past programs' and contracts' information; silo repositories' holdings, reference materials); and, as noted by Davenport and Prusak, awareness of the connection of individuals across the enterprise to one another based upon their interest and contributions to studies, initiatives, and programs.

While not directly mentioning the necessity to plug special librarians into the COP support infrastructure, St. Clair et al. (2003) have identified behaviors critical to COP viability—these behaviors are identified as “knowledge services” and are largely built upon knowledge development and knowledge sharing activities, described earlier in this paper as the foundation for KM and communities.

It [knowledge services] builds on the assumption that all stakeholders accept their responsibility to develop, to learn, and to share tacit, explicit and cultural knowledge within an enterprise... Knowledge development and knowledge sharing exists for the benefit of the organizational enterprise with which the library and its stakeholders are affiliated.

...

... At its most successful, knowledge services is about establishing social communities; about creating the social infrastructure in which all stakeholders contribute to the successful achievement of the parent organization's mission (St. Clair et al., 2003).

In an article describing how the school library media specialist might take a lead in developing learning communities that involve teachers and library staff, Violet Harada (2002) has identified a “taxonomy” reflecting a graduated scale of presence. Her taxonomy is adapted here to describe the range of actions of the IRC related to Communities of Practice launch and nurture.

#### The IRC's participation taxonomy

- Zero involvement—IRC is bypassed
- Smooth operating infrastructure—the IRC can respond to requests for information
- Individual assistance—The IRC supports any individual within the enterprise requiring reference and resource support (assuming that individual has a charge code!)
- Spontaneous interaction and gathering—The IRC maintains a virtual, online presence such that support is available on a 24 x 7 basis and subject matter experts from across the enterprise are part of the network

- **Cursory planning**—Some Community of Practice champions come to the IRC to provide some involvement with planning, content requirements, and content delivery (presentation, organization).
- **Planned gathering**—The IRC associates itself with executive champions and other owners of the Communities investment and identifies proactively the services and products it can provide through an ongoing, committed relationship to each Community of Practice. These include information audits, subject matter expert surveys and interviews, development of controlled vocabularies and metadata tagging schema, and classification or taxonomy structures.
- **Evangelical outreach and advocacy**—Executive champions and other Community of Practice owners and members proclaim from on high the value that the IRC has delivered to the community and the enterprise.

Chun Wei Choo, writing in 2000 about information professionals and their role in the enterprise said it best.

Become involved early in programs to better understand the problems and context, clarify goals, help identify alternatives. The proactive stance is a change from the more traditional mode of reacting to information requests and decisions that have already been made (Choo, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

his paper has focused on a set of interrelated concepts and theories that target maximization of the value of data, information, and organizational knowledge. Definitions of tacit and explicit knowledge were included and emphasis put on the enterprise value of its workers' tacit knowledge as the foundation for emergent knowledge capable of delivering new and innovative product and service directions for the enterprise.

Communities of Practice have been described as the factory for converting tacit knowledge of an individual or group to knowledge that can be applied across an enterprise—not only articulating new knowledge but further improving the social network of an enterprise to ensure that as much information as possible is identified, mined, refined and made available for decision-making and enterprise growth. Individuals join communities to share insights, gain valuable assistance from their peers and colleagues and also to make a name for themselves within a knowledge sphere. The community creates a place for sharing and exchange even when the community members may never meet nor speak to one another face-to-face. Communities of Practice have shown considerable benefit for those enterprises that take a structured approach to forming community. This requires solid linkage between

the community purpose and the enterprise's mission, goals and objectives as well as strong executive championship.

Although Community membership is voluntary, a support staff is required to launch and nurture the COP as it evolves. That support staff should include special librarians from the enterprise IRC(s) who can deliver on the Community's need for content. Content in this perspective means both information resources and people (members), as librarians are uniquely suited to identify similar interests from individuals and groups throughout the organization and thereby work as knowledge brokers to make social and informational connections that benefit community establishment and growth. The ultimate goal of Communities of Practice is to provide long-term value to the enterprise. The special librarian skill set includes capabilities such as understanding subject area information resources and content categorization and organization – these skills are critical to Community success. Special librarians understand the enterprise's culture and are required to identify and improve information flows such that the diverse membership of the enterprise is appropriately included in communities, information exchanges and sharing.

The IRC and the special librarians are encouraged to play a proactive, outreach role within the enterprise. Find the burgeoning communities of practice and help them identify their scope and focus, identify content that can seed the community and move toward ongoing community membership where special librarian skills can continue to make a positive difference in the use of explicit information and emergent knowledge. The IRC will no longer be perceived as the store place of 'static' materials but rather be seen as the authentic enterprise-level player it is—bringing the special librarians own tacit knowledge and professional skills forward to institutionalize the Communities of Practice concept within the enterprise.

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