

The role of the corporate library in the knowledge management process

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Summary

To invest in external information is very profitable for a corporation. However this valuable information is not always managed in a systematic and efficient way. A strategy for managing external information is outlined and the role of the corporate library in the knowledge management process is described.

Knowledge management in Swedish corporations

During 1997 I undertook an investigation in nine Swedish corporations on the value of information and information management. Five of the companies had a corporate library and four had not a corporate library. Tetra Pak was not included in the investigation.

The investigation had three major parts

1. To try to determine a value of information. This was accomplished through a questionnaire I sent out to persons working with market or R&D activities where I asked them to estimate the time and/or money they had saved when using information in journal articles, electronic documents, books, patents, external and internal reports.
2. To see how information from the external world was managed in the corporation. For this I did interviews with information, market, R&D and library managers in the companies.
3. To see the role that a corporate library has or should have in the company (the interviews and parts from the questionnaire).

The information investigated is for the company external information but also thick internal reports - the kind of information normally handled by a corporate library.

The Swedish Society for Technical Documentation has granted the investigation, and published the report as Knowledge management in Swedish corporations. The value of information and information services. TLS Meddelande 28, 1998.

The value of information

Of what benefit is information from the external world to the corporation? I asked the respondents to estimate the benefit in terms of economic value; either to estimate saved time or saved money from using the information. I also asked for the eventual revenues coming from the information. It is of course very difficult to do such estimations as there often are a considerable time lapse between the moment of reading the information and when it becomes evident if it has been of benefit or not and to what extent. Despite of the difficulties I got estimations for 252 or totally 477 documents. Only 4 % of the documents were said to be of no use at all.

In general time or money savings were considered to be great. Translated to economic terms (using the rate 500 SEK per hour) the value was estimated to

Electronic document	36 500
Journal article	22 300
Book	56 300
External report	82 700
Patent	122 700
Internal report	67 700

The costs for getting and reading the information were considerable less and it therefore the investments in external information is profitable for the corporation.

The use and management of the information

Although the external information was seen as essential to the company it was not seen as obvious to read the information in working hours. Actually 355 hours per year, that is 20 % of a year's working hours, was spent assimilating, that is reading, external information, but the respondents told that they often did it in their leisure time or when travelling.

I asked the respondents how they got to know about the existence of the information. It turned out that colleagues were the main source of reference to the information both in the companies with a corporate library and in the companies without a corporate library. The library was the second main source of reference in the companies with a corporate library, and in the others it was the journal circulation. About a quarter of all information coming to a person had not been asked for. Much information was actually accessed by chance rather than by a systematic effort.

There was a wish to improve the management of the information through decreasing the amount of information and especially the amount of paper. To have structured, relevant, accurate, and reliable information available at one's desktop was a strong desire. The respondents were uncertain both if the important information in fact reached the company and, if it did, it was distributed to the persons needing it. Despite of this fact, very few persons felt a need for a more formal strategy for the information management.

Knowledge management processes

Knowledge management has become the new fashion word in management. It reflects the emphasis on human resources as an asset for the corporation, what is called the intellectual capital. This asset needs to be shared in the organisation and to be more independent of individuals. It is true that each individual is unique and in a way irreplaceable, but much the individuals knowledge can be documented. Documentation is the basis for knowledge sharing that in its turn is the basis for knowledge management. I don't thereby say that documentation is the only mean for knowledge sharing.

The organisation of a knowledge management process is teamwork where different competencies need to co-operate. The competencies needed are

- Knowledge of the business areas
- Information management
- Information structuring
- Personnel management
- Organisational development
- IT competence.

The motor should be a person or function with overall overview of the organisation and also a person with a large contact network and the ability to influence the organisation. To create knowledge management processes is a way to create a new way to work almost a paradigm shift when it comes to information. The managers must let go their monopoly of strategic information, and consider an organisation that makes information more widely spread. The employees must themselves take the responsibilities to keep themselves informed. Instead of being fed with pieces of information meant for them, they must actively search for the information they need. Everybody must be prepared to share their information and knowledge with others. As a whole this means a more open and flexible organisation and people who has their confidence in their unique competence and their ability to manage change, rather than their possession of unique information not held by others.

Actions towards the establishing of a knowledge management process are

- Investigating the organisational conditions and resources.
- Define the issues of key importance. Focus on them in the beginning.
- Setting up an organisational system for knowledge sharing
- Setting up an IT system for knowledge sharing
- Take your time to implement and consider the need of the support from the managers and employees.
- Training programmes.
- Routines for evaluation and improvements.

To integrate external information in the knowledge management process means some special considerations.

Where is the wanted information?

Is it reliable?

How can we access it?

What is the cost?

Additional actions must therefore be undertaken for the external information.

- Evaluation of information sources and negotiations with information suppliers.
- Special organisation to secure the continuous inflow of relevant and reliable information into the corporation.
- Co-operation with the information suppliers to match the computer systems and to solve the copyright issues.
- Managing even the information that is not in electronic form. Much of the books, journals, reports and so on are still only published in the form of paper.

The corporate library's contribution to a knowledge management process

As we have seen from the survey on information value and management, external information is of considerable value to the corporation. On the other hand this valuable asset is often not managed in an efficient and systematic way. Knowledge management processes are means to improve this present situation. The corporate library's profession is information management mainly management of the information from the external world. This kind of information requires special skills to manage. Traditionally the corporate library acts as an intermediate to the external information in doing information retrieval in commercial databases or other media. The library not only locates the information but also actually sees to that their clients get it in paper or electronic form. Another characteristic of library services is the organising and structuring of information.

There is a weak point in the role of acting as a direct intermediate to the external information. A corporate library can not act as a direct intermediate for all the external information a large corporation needs. It would mean an unrealistic number of staff or/and a bottleneck in the access. The solution is that the employees do their own information retrieval within an established knowledge management process, organised to support even the access of external information. There, the corporation needs a function to evaluate information sources and to establish corporate agreements with the information suppliers. It needs a function systematising and organising the access, retrieval and disseminating of the information. The employees need help in finding their information, and to systematise their own retrieval and dissemination of information. They need information to be easy available, structured and organised in user-friendly databases. The competence held by the corporate library staff fits very well in this picture.

Knowledge and competence on

- The information needs in the corporation
- Competence in evaluating information sources
- Competence in structuring the information and make it retrievable
- Competence in retrieving information and knowledge of their clients' information retrieval behaviour
- Contacts with and knowledge of information suppliers
- Knowledge of systems and tools to access and retrieve information and handle it
- Competence and knowledge in disseminating the right information to the right person in right time and at a right price.

Knowledge management at Tetra Pak

At Tetra Pak a knowledge management project has started a year ago called The Innovation Process. Three "intelligence" activities have been defined within this project: Market Intelligence, Technology Intelligence and Competitor Intelligence. One of the key issues is knowledge sharing – to get access to the now scattered knowledge. Another key issue is to define the areas, which need to be systematically scanned and monitored. The Research Intelligence Library is mainly involved in the Technology Intelligence process.

In the Technology Intelligence process some key technologies have been defined where Tetra Pak should be the world leading company. A key technology manager has been appointed for each of these areas. The responsibility of the key technology manager is to initiate activities of monitoring and scanning technical news from the outside world, and also to prepare reports on the results of the scanning. The key technology managers appoint technology scouts. The scouts are supposed to scan the external world for interesting information and report their findings into a database on Tetra Pak's Intranet. The key technology managers are continuously extracting information from the database, and making intelligence out of the information in the form of reports. The target group for these technical intelligence reports is managers at different levels working with Tetra Pak's present products, as well as those working with the coming products and the ideas for the future.

Technology Intelligence Library's role in the Technology Intelligence process

The Technology Intelligence Library at Tetra Pak is a support for the R&D activities in Tetra Pak. The TIL has many of the usual services of a corporate library: information retrieval in commercial databases and other media, alerts – standing search profiles in the databases, training in searching the Internet and databases, collections of journals and books, ordering copies of journal articles, handling internal technical reports.

During the last two years, when the new media the intranet was implemented at Tetra Pak, the Technology Intelligence Library has devoted much effort to make information available for the information users on the intranet. The idea is that instead of acting as an intermediate for the information in performing literature searches and the like, the library should instead make useful, accurate, relevant and structured information available for the clients.

These activities are of course a support for the Technology Intelligence process. In addition we have some special activities with direct focus on this process.

I am a member of the Technology Intelligence Reference Group working with the key issues of the process, like

- The content of a technology intelligence process,
- The availability and the structure of the content,
- The organisation around it,
- The motivating of the contributors to share their knowledge and information,
- The promotion of the contributions and the use of the intelligence coming from the process
- The training in the methods of systematic scanning and in using the IT system set up to support the process.

Technology Intelligence Library is the infomaster of the Technology Intelligence site on Tetra Pak's Intranet and has an overall responsibility for the functionality of the site.

It is the Technology Intelligence Library's responsibility to manage the internal technical reports.

Finally Technology Intelligence Library has a training programme for the persons working with technology scouting. It consists of the six parts:

1. Introducing a method for systematic scanning and disseminating of information from the external world. An overview of relevant information sources and means to use them.
2. Training in information retrieval on the Internet
3. Training in information retrieval in commercial databases
4. Patents as a source of information
5. Individual information solutions
6. Follow-up meetings

To summarise the Technology Intelligence Library takes an active part in the planning and management of the Technology Intelligence process, taking care of the needs for external technical information, integrating internal and external information, acting as an infomaster for the site on the intranet and train the participants in systematic monitoring of external information.

With the engagement in the Technology Intelligence Process my colleagues at the library and myself really feel that the corporate library is used as the useful resource it should be to the corporation. It is also the engagement that has brought most progress and enjoyment to the library and to me personally during my sixteen years career as a manager of a corporate library.