Making Information and Knowledge Easy to Find and Use

By organizing information assets and making them more accessible, special librarians can foster the development of policies that support their organization's mission and goals.

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In April, the SLA Board of Directors approved a revised set of competencies for information professionals. These revisions, developed by a task force headed by David Shumaker, resulted from extensive discussions about the knowledge and skills needed by 21st-century information professionals to remain relevant to their organizations.

One of the primary goals of this process was to encourage the use of the competencies by information professionals as well as by C-level executives, academic faculty in universities, human resources professionals, and a wide variety of others. In its discussions of knowledge management, content management, and information search and retrieval, the competencies document makes clear that it is designed to be used beyond the library and information center to help foster an understanding of, and the development and maintenance of, knowledge and content management policies that support the organization's overall mission and objectives.

In adding information organization and management as a competency in this revision, the task force did not intend to diminish or disregard the value of traditional information skills such as cataloging. On the contrary, we wanted to highlight them. Cataloging and other technical services have been included in the competencies in some form for a long time, and the task force retained them while making sure they are understood to be relevant to more information-centric positions.

Additionally, the language and skills described in the information management section of the competencies document clearly support the continued creation of information and knowledge. In any organization, regardless of type, information and knowledge are valuable assets and should be treated, maintained, and used as such.

Spreading the Wealth

The information organization competency (titled "Organization of Data, Information, and Knowledge Assets") covers the organization, preservation, and retention of assets over a defined life span; it also discusses making those assets findable while taking into account the mission and operational needs of the organization. This competency lays out a framework for creating a foundation for the excellent management of data, information, and knowledge assets. It clearly defines the roles of knowledge managers, librarians, content managers, and other information professionals in establishing the requirements and procedures for metadata development and application. It also includes skills in evaluating and adapting industry standards for classification and categorization systems, storage and preservation, location, and connectivity to ensure that assets are properly managed.

The accumulation and organization of valuable information has gone far beyond purchasing magazines and books and shelving them in a library. The crux of the matter is that if data, information, or knowledge assets cannot be located and reused, they constitute an added, unnecessary cost. All information needs to be organized so it can be found quickly and easily by the average worker. Findability minimizes the costs of re-creating or rewriting content and provides better value over the lifespan of an organization.

This competency also takes into account the changing business environment and expands on the foundation of traditional cataloging by requiring the ability to develop custom metadata schemas and custom taxonomies and ontologies as local circumstances and subject matter warrant. Taking organizational circumstances into account is critical in making the information professional's practice relevant and useful.

An additional aspect of this competency is its embrace of "spreading the wealth." We, as information managers, cannot hold information captive in our libraries and information centers, nor should we want to act as gatekeepers. The more information we make available and findable, the more often it will be used for organizational business.

It is critical that we train others in effective practices for information organization and management, because

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content management starts at the point where a user chooses to save a document. A trained and qualified information professional can teach others about metadata application at the desktop level, so the foundation of the content management plan can start where the information is being created. It is also important for information professionals to provide high-quality, relevant tools to ease findability and ongoing access.

"Spreading the wealth" through training and collaborating in the implementation of systems and customized metadata has always been an integral part of the information professional's work. The Competencies Task Force codified training others in effective practices for information organization and management in the new document.

Taking Pre-emptive Measures

The value of the competencies document in general and of the information organization competency in particular can be seen in the way that most organizations treat their information assets. Regardless of their mission, organizations generate information every day— e-mails, patent plans and forms, agreements with distributors and buyers, marketing materials, briefs, research findings, business development plans, and so on. Companies merge and acquire each other all the time simply to expand their base of these and other types of intellectual property. Patents and copyrights are valuable information assets, and if they are not organized or can't be accessed and found, their value can diminish.

Companies have furniture, software, and other tangible assets, which are carefully inventoried, counted, and maintained. Facilities departments manage buildings so that the staff have a place to work. Human resources departments manage the health and welfare of employees, helping to ensure that the work of the company gets done. Yet many companies organize their information only as required by law or when a problem arises, even though putting pre-emptive measures in place to provide access to information quickly

and efficiently would save money in the long run.

Granted, assigning values to vacation policies on the corporate intranet, engineering drawings on a CAD server, briefs and pleadings on shared drives, and meeting notes on Sharepoint servers is difficult. Such a step is generally not even considered until an organization contemplates a major change or confronts a problem. Developing and implementing information organization and management practices early on saves money by saving time and minimizes stress by preventing problems.

All organizational information has value, because it communicates something about the product or business and can be reused. This is just as true in nonprofit organizations as in for-profit organizations. For example, academic organizations have cultural and historical assets, some of priceless research value. Universities have business interests, too, including technology transferral and licensing intellectual property. The information management competency assists librarians in tapping into these assets and interests and facilitating related information goals by managing content and knowledge.

The rise of powerful search engines has not obviated the need for information organization and management. In fact, the proliferation of technology has highlighted the need for people to take charge of company information and organize it. Providing the groundwork (such as customized metadata schema) for targeted search tools contributes to the overall success of the organization.

For example, many tech companies started in an informal and friendly way and saved their materials on Box or DropBox or Google Drive (or all of them). As the companies have grown, this practice has continued to the point where the materials are so scattered that they are difficult or impossible to find. Along the way, some people have left these organizations and taken their knowledge with them, adding another layer of chaos. Finding an answer to a simple question, such as "How many hours of vacation do I accrue every

year," has become a Herculean effort.

The life cycle of information is also important. People generally want the most up-to-date vacation policy, not the policy from ten years ago. Thus, developing retention and destruction policies and procedures based on legal requirements and on organizational and operational needs is critical, and these roles are included in the competency. Part of the life cycle management of information includes applying quality control practices to ensure the appropriate application of policies and practices for information organization and management.

In many organizations, information is undervalued and undermanaged until problems arise. Information professionals are in the best position, because of their special training and experience, to recognize potential problems and either avert or correct them. Organizations with trained, experienced, and innovative enterprise content managers and information professionals will be more valuable and better positioned to succeed in today's ever-changing information environment. **SLA**