

# Knowledge management — a guide

In October the much awaited Australian knowledge management standard (Knowledge management — a guide AS 5037–2005) was released. The first nationally endorsed knowledge management standard in the world, the standard has been developed for professionals who have either recently encountered knowledge management or who are looking for further guidance. It advances a progressive view of the field using a Map/Build/Operationalise approach, emphasising the establishment of incremental knowledge interventions which will assist an organisation implement knowledge management.

The field of knowledge management has emerged from a variety of disciplines though its foundations clearly lie in areas familiar to us as information professionals — the man-

agement of explicit knowledge including information, documents and records. This influence is evident in the membership of the Committee MB–007 that developed the standard, which includes a number of librarians and other information professionals. Each of us on the Committee however recognised that knowledge management is broader than the management of objects, expanding to encompass the management of tacit knowledge including networks, skills transfer and learning.

The strength of a knowledge management lies in its power to combine the organisational elements of people, process, technology and content in a coherent approach.

The Standard was prepared by Committee MB–007, Knowledge Management. As well as the Australian Li-

brary and Information Association the following organisations were represented on the Committee: Australian Industry Group, Australian Securities and Investments Commission, Australian Society of Archivists, Adelaide Graduate School of Business, Committee IT–021 Liaison, Computer Human Interaction Special Interest Group, CSIRO, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Griffith University, Institute for Information Management, Records Management Association of Australasia, University of Technology, Sydney, and RMIT University.

ALIA's representatives were Marion Nicholson for the initial meetings and Dale Chatwin through to publication.

**Dale Chatwin, Program manager, Knowledge and Information Management, Austrade, Canberra**

## KM managers of the future

Steve Neilsen

A few years ago in Canberra's *Public Sector Informant* I wrote an article called 'The ideal knowledge manager'. In it I addressed the challenge of finding staff able to work as knowledge managers or as part of a KM team. I suggested then that librarians and information professionals had a head start in terms of relevant skills and background.

In the time since I wrote the article it has not become any easier to find the right KM manager. The recent release of the Australian Knowledge Management Standard (AS 5037–2005) reveals that, more than ever, the key characteristic required is to be a change agent. This is an update on my original article, based on some of my observations of the way KM has evolved in the last few years.

In the intervening period many organisations have started KM projects. Some of these projects have been successful and some have failed. This has set up an environment where KM is seen as a luxury rather than an essential element of a larger information management strategy. The failures (or at least the failure to deliver sustained benefits) have made both IT management and senior management sceptical about both the benefits and wisdom of investing in more or even starting new KM projects. Like any new technology, it has to prove itself before the majority of managers will even begin to consider it. An alternative is to embed it in day-to-day processes so that it becomes invisible. In the public sector in Canberra, I think KM projects are receiving scant attention and probably even less funding.

This creates an interesting environment for existing KM managers and those aspiring to a role in KM. To be successful, the KM manager will have to create an environment in which KM projects will be acceptable and will deliver the promised benefits.

There are few people who have a good theoretical and practical understanding of KM. This number is increasing though, because a number of KM courses are available in universities and they have been successful in attracting students.

A KM project requires an environment where information sharing is the norm. I have yet to see any government agency where there is a concerted effort to encourage information sharing. Part of the problem is that information sharing encourages a degree of trust and transparency. Many smart managers have been very successful in using information to their own advantage by being selective in what is shared and what is hidden.

It may be cynical of me to observe that these same managers publicise their own successes but ensure that others' innovative, but failed, projects are publicised. In a true KM environment all projects, both successful and unsuccessful, would be analysed and examined for lessons learnt.

Sharing the lessons learnt would significantly improve the success rate of all projects and give senior managers evidence of worthwhile projects. A good KM manager would develop the sales skills necessary to convince the sceptical senior managers that KM could provide significant benefits to an organisation.

Unfortunately our senior managers are also too busy to insist that knowledge is shared and unwilling to recognise the possible benefits. We would all do well to emulate the safety engineers and investigators who, by rigorous analysis and sharing of information, look at what went wrong (and what went right) so as to improve factory safety, transport safety, and occupational health and safety. The ability to implement this organisational and attitudinal change would be a useful skill for the aspiring KM manager.

▶ The key skill for a KM manager is that of organisational change agent. KM has been around for a few years now, but speak to a range of middle and senior managers about KM and you get blank looks. If you engage them and ask questions, eventually they will understand what you are saying.

Starting a KM project with managers like this is very difficult because the benefits are not immediately obvious. Getting support or assistance is also difficult. The solution of course is organisational change. Those of you who have tried will know how hard it is to get widespread acceptance of a new idea or an innovative process. KM is one of those new ideas that is struggling for acceptance and this is reflected in the limited range of KM projects underway.

Making the grand assumption that the organisation accepts that KM is worth the investment, the next major hurdle is that of project management. Project management is a concept not well understood by many managers who see it as a means of locking in delivery dates and budgets, rather than a mechanism for organising existing data about project activity.

One of the key attributes of a good project manager is the ability to run a successful project. The skill set includes selecting projects that are likely to be successful, obtaining the necessary funding, managing

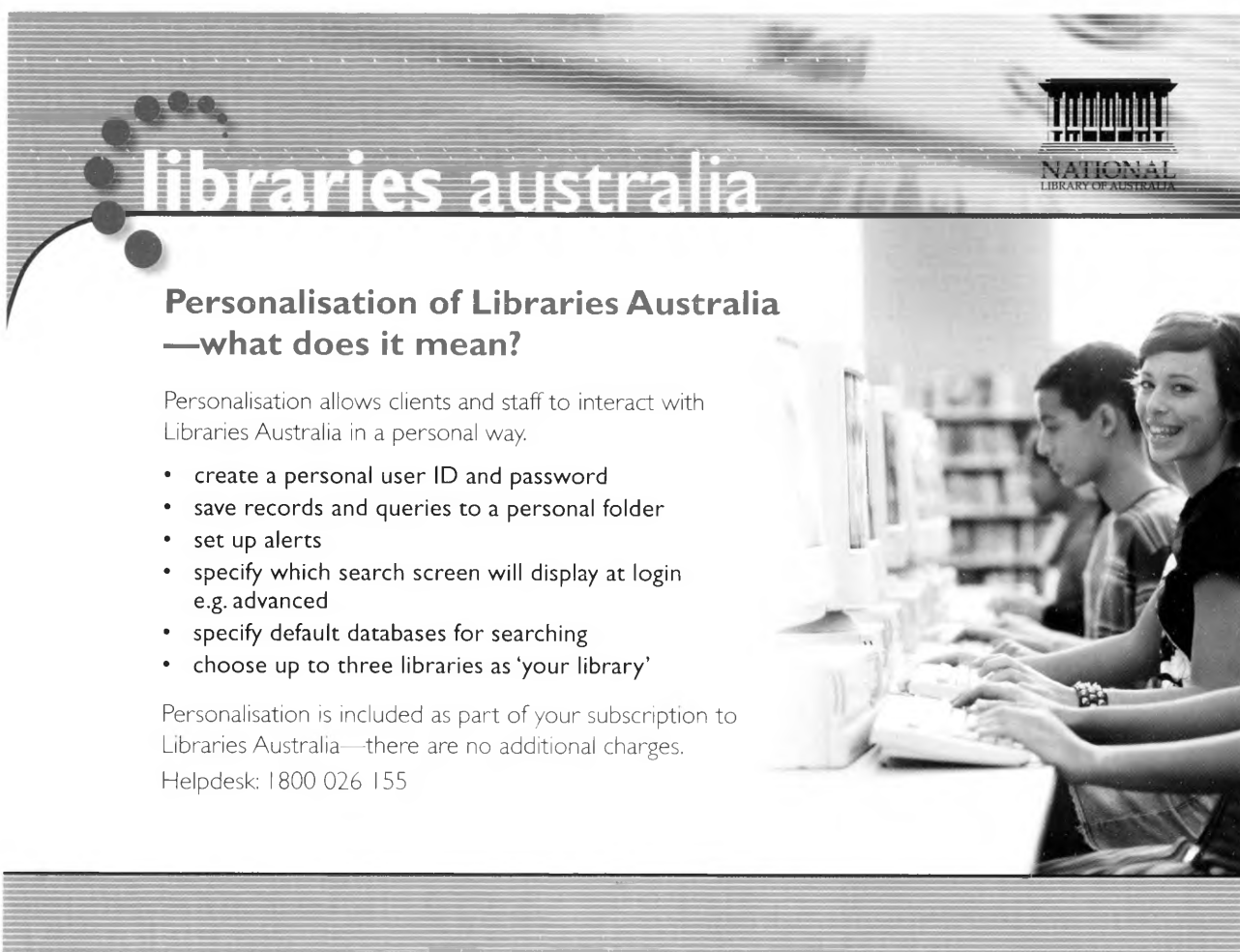
the delivery of the project and the expectations of stakeholders. At the end of the project there is a need to have the necessary financial and analytical skills to prove the cost-benefit of the implemented project. Skill sets like this are hard to come by.

Probably more importantly, a person with these skill sets or who has this type of experience can be lured away by potentially more interesting projects, especially career-enhancing projects with widespread support and funding.

Aspiring KM managers (and existing ones) will need a set of skills encompassing the management of organisational change, project management and project delivery. The other key skill will be sales, to convince managers that KM can deliver tangible results. People with these management and sales skills are in high demand and may be encouraged to work on projects which are seen as more corporately focused, making it even harder to find a suitable KM manager. KM does provide a challenge which, if conquered, will guarantee future employment.

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*KM projects are receiving scant attention... and could provide significant benefits*



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