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Knowledge Management: Toward Understanding in a Multicultural World

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Abstract: Knowledge management on a global scale is now an opportunity and an imperative. Globalization is a factor in just about every issue affecting us today. Along with the development of new information and communication technologies, the conditions now exist for renewed dialogue among cultures and civilizations. Knowledge management is a key tool that can be used to share the knowledge which will lead to greater understanding among differing cultures. Librarians are by definition knowledge managers and should be leaders in global efforts to share knowledge. Understanding the factors that make for a successful multicultural collaboration is critical to undertaking any global collaborative effort. Many of those factors are illustrated in the experience of the Global Legal Information Network, an international knowledge management project of 42 government partners around the world.

UNESCO tell us that, "globalization, facilitated by the rapid development of new information and communication technologies, though representing a challenge for cultural diversity, creates the conditions for renewed dialogue among cultures and civilizations." Koche Matsuura, UNESCO Director general stated that," Intercultural dialogue is the best guarantee of peace." Knowledge management on a global scale presents more than an opportunity to facilitate that dialogue. It is an imperative. It is the key strategy that can be used to share the knowledge which will lead to greater understanding among differing cultures.

Eugenie Prime, a U.S. library leader, exhorts her fellow librarians to "have no puny visions", so today I am going to discuss knowledge management not in the organizational sense. I will leave that discussion to today's remaining panelists. I will discuss it in the context of using its general development of collaborative processes to turn the world into a learning organization. I will demonstrate that librarians as knowledge managers can play a role in facilitating intercultural dialogue that leads to world peace.

When I began thinking about this presentation I engaged myself in a debate regarding whether I should begin with the usual practice of defining terms. I am speaking primarily after all to the knowledge management section of IFLA. I decided to check and see if there were new developments in defining knowledge management, a subject on which there is an agreement that practitioners agree there is no one definition. When I did a search, I discovered that high up in the search results was the Wikipedia, probably one of the largest grass roots KM projects currently in existence. It was surprising to me that in that context, the KM entry was rooted in the traditional practice and that it spoke of KM mainly in the business sense. However, the Wikipedia is an example of how the opportunities for knowledge management can go beyond the single organization and indeed there are already several examples in the library world of knowledge management projects that cross national and cultural borders.

There are as many opportunities as there are kinds of libraries and there are already examples of on-going projects. Certainly corporate special libraries have responded to the need to link their knowledge workers that are distributed in company offices around the globe to a common set of resources. Special library communities have started their own projects. The Biodiversity Heritage library is an example in the biological sciences community and the Global legal Information network, (GLIN), which I will use as a model for this presentation, is an effort by the legal information community. The World Digital library and the European Digital Library represent efforts of national and academic libraries to build a common repository of their accumulated knowledge. In addition, there are collaborative efforts within library functions. QuestionPoint has enabled collaborative reference in the digital world. Knowledge management is nothing new for librarians. We are knowledge managers.

These efforts have been undertaken because globalization, interconnectivity and the ability to engage in partnerships means we have the capacity to build global virtual libraries. There are a number of factors that require libraries and information organizations to share knowledge across national boundaries:

The first of these is globalization. There are both pragmatic and altruistic motives that result in institutions sharing their information across their borders. They include:

There is a need to dealing with issues that do not respect or recognize national boundaries. They cannot be solved by one country alone. For example global climate change is an issue for everyone. Scientists, government officials , agricultural experts, energy companies to name a few, all have a stake in sharing knowledge about this issue. Preservation of cultural artifacts and of the knowledge contained in them is a shared issue of this profession. In my area, the law, the parliament, its library, lawyers and judges, the business community and individuals all have the need now not only to know the laws of their own country but to understand the laws of other nations. Business investors looking for a foreign investment opportunity, legislators looking to see how other countries have handled an issue to see if they can get ideas for what to do themselves, individuals looking to adopt children from other countries all have need of a legal knowledge management tool. I emphasize that it needs to be a knowledge management tool because there is a difference between a database and a knowledge management program.

There is a difference between a true knowledge management tool and a database. Databases have information but may be absent the context which knowledgeable contributors add to that information. To use knowledge management effectively projects must have collaborative partners who are willing to contribute knowledge in addition to information. Collaboration among partners makes a difference.

Partners are needed and desired for a variety of reasons including the project is too big for one institution, and ownership of the information resources needed is in several countries. Most important in the global arena however is that collaborators bring their different perspectives as part of their knowledge base. This is extremely important when that perspective is needed to bring understanding to a multicultural project.

Global projects are doable because technology has greatly expanded our capacity to create and share knowledge in real time and on a larger scale. Technology trends are towards software that takes the clerical work out of portal building; automating updating process allowing the knowledge worker to concentrate on expanding the scope of resources provided adding the context, and improving the currency of the product. It allows the knowledge manager to concentrate on the really difficult task of building a knowledge sharing culture. Web 2.0has enhanced the capacity to share information and has furthered the ability of potential contributors to collaborate on a knowledge sharing project. The application of social networking tools and techniques facilitate the ability to work together to build community while contributing and sharing content. It has enabled the strategy of global content integration to foster the greater understanding among cultures and to preserve cultural diversity. Therefore not only the end result, the contributed content leads to understanding, but the process of collaboration itself furthers that goal.

If knowledge management on a global scale is the goal how would one define global content integration for the purposes of this discussion? It is the creation of a knowledge management system of knowledge assets contributed from around the world by equal partners. Parties retain ownership of their content and have the responsibility to describe it and put it in the context of their own culture. It is a true collaboration in the knowledge management sense but also in the Web 2.0 sense. In order to explain I will use the Global Legal Information Network as an example of this.

In order to understand let me very briefly explain what GLIN is. GLIN is an international cooperative of 42 nations and growing, all of who have agreed to enter their laws and other legal material including judicial decisions, legislative records, and other legal writings, into a common database according to agreed upon standards. The characteristics of GLIN are it is global, intergovernmental, non-profit, multilingual, cooperative organization. Every full text document is accompanied by a summary that describes the legal effect of the document written by an attorney trained in the laws of that country. It is also both a database and human network. The database is presented and searchable in 13 languages and as new countries join there is a commitment to add their official language as well if it is not already represented. It is also a human network of tacit knowledge for the other members. When the

summary leads to more questions or a country does not have the capacity to translate the original document of the law, the GLIN station members are readily available to answer those kinds of questions for each other.

All of the members have signed the GLIN charter which states that whereas , it is beneficial to promote the rule of law within and among nations, to facilitate the orderly development of national and international laws, and to encourage mutual understanding among peoples with differing legal heritages; and whereas , these goals would be well served by a legal archive that would provide access to authentic, current, complete versions of the law of many nations, presented in the original language with summaries in a common language, organized under a standardized scheme and shared indexing vocabulary, and delivered electronically they are agreeing to join GLIN. The charter also states that the signatories have agreed to share the burdens of making the laws of the world available throughout the word. These statements are significant because they are illustrative of 2 factors that make an initiative a good candidate for a global collaborative project:

- Partners share a common interest and are mutually interdependent.
- The project is not owned by any one country or partner.

The GLIN experience also highlights a prime lesson learned for success. In order to have equal partners, all partners must maintain a level of sensitivity about differences in culture. For American of course, that means reigning in our tendency to think we know it all and that our way of doing things is the best. It means realizing there are different points of view regarding access to information and that sometimes a short term compromise is necessary in order to have long term impact. Partners should always remember that being judgmental in these situations does not help. There are several factors that when present help to guarantee equality of the partners which is important to the success of any multicultural knowledge sharing project.

First, there must be a decision-making structure that emphasizes collaboration and cooperation. This goes beyond the common understanding of partnership where participation is the defining common feature to partnership where decision-making is the defining common feature. This has been an area of concern when discussing global digital libraries. It is clear that countries want to retain ownership of their cultural assets, even in their digitized form and to have a say in how they are presented and explained. This concern for example is at the heart of discussions regarding libraries partnering with GOOGLE. In GLIN, the response to these concerns is the GLIN charter. Having a governance document, whether it is as formal as a charter or it is an agreement or memorandum of understanding of some kind, sets the ground rules for participation and gives representatives of different cultures the assurances that they need that they have ownership. In addition to entering and summarizing their own laws, members collaborate on the subject thesaurus which provides the taxonomy covering different types of legal jurisdictions so that accurate and complete search results will be achieved when doing comparative searching. In true knowledge management fashion, users do not have to know what they don't know in order to get accurate and complete search results. This is the value a collaborative project adds that a single database does not. The creation of the thesaurus by itself is one path that leads to common understanding.

Most importantly however, the collaboration model is also used to govern and plan improvements to the database. The features developed for each new release are requirements that were developed and recommended at the GLIN Directors meeting, the annual meeting convened to discuss GLIN and its plans for the future.

Standards are the second requirement for success in a global knowledge sharing project. The important thing to remember is that the standards must be agreed to by the partners and must suit the purpose and resources of the project. Standards fall into at least 3 areas:

- Information quality standards
- Interoperability
- The need for conceptual linking through a thesaurus.

Information quality involves authoritativeness and accuracy. This is an area where structured collaboration adds value that grass roots collaboration can lack. By having information quality standards libraries and other information providers are adding value by assuring users that the item they are using is authentic and that the information provided about it is accurate and provided by an expert. In the field of law this is particularly important as having authoritative and accurate information can be the difference between winning and losing a case. The need for information quality standards can be demonstrated in many other disciplines as well.

Standards must also be established for the technical quality of the digital images.

Technical standards involve a number of areas such as defining the production environment and defining the hosting environment. Global projects have a wide range of choices before them. Open source is available and can help to lessen resource requirements. As already mentioned Web 2.0 technology makes it easier to build a common platform for contributors to use. The important thing to remember is that the standards are there to serve the collaboration. .In the case of GLIN this included answering such questions as backup resources, the need for network redundancy, firewall and other security requirements, IP expansion, mean time to restore and application availability. The standards are there to allow the systems to exchange data and information and to manage knowledge.

Perhaps the most important standard in a multicultural environment is the one that contributes to a common understanding, which is a multilingual thesaurus. The larger the scope of the project, the more difficult this is to do. However, it must be addressed if contributors are to find their commonalities and to understand their differences. In the case of GLIN, the foreign legal specialist, foreign trained lawyers, who are experts in their jurisdiction, and the GLIN station legal analysts, participate in person and remotely in GLIN thesaurus meetings. New terms are suggested and are defined in terms of all of the different types of jurisdictions, civil law, customary law, common law, religious law and combinations of those. It is this kind of labor intensive work that guarantees the accuracy of search results and that makes a GLIN search different from a GOOGLE search.

Knowledge management in a multicultural environment also means being savvy about recruiting partners. Patience is necessary. Different cultures have different requirements for getting approvals. When looking at potential partners, stability of the institution may be an issue to consider. How much risk can the partnership sustain without undermining the viability of the project? Anyone recruiting partners needs to do their research ahead of time. Partners need to see how participation is aligned with their own strategic goals. Being flexible and anticipating potential problems and solutions and coming prepared with some alternative solutions will help potential partners get to yes.

Stuart Brand, auth of *The Long Now,* has asked and answered the question, "what are the duties of librarians when the client is civilization? He challenged us to b*e* "the constant memory the integrators, and the source of continuity.*"* As knowledge managers, we are being given a powerful chance to our expand our thinking about what knowledge management can do The opportunity to think about employing it as a strategy for endeavors that are beyond the traditional business systems and purposes is here. There can be a new collaboration that brings people and their knowledge together to share the knowledge of their cultures that is contained in their books, their art, their maps, their photos, and most importantly in their heads where the act of collaboration itself also leads to a greater understanding among differing culture.

I want to leave you with the words of Peter Senge, an American scientist and the author of *The Fifth Discipline: the Art andPpractice of theLlearning Organization,* "sharing knowledge is not about giving something or getting something from them. That is only valid for information sharing. Sharing knowledge occurs when people are genuinely interested in helping one another develop new capacities for action; it is about creating learning processes." That is our biggest challenge. If we are to turn the world into a learning organization, than it is up to us to collaborate in such a way that we learn from the process as well as the end result.