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Blow up the corporate library: why it’s still a good idea

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ABSTRACT

In 1993 Davenport and Prusak wrote an article with the attention-grabbing title of “Blow Up the Corporate Library” which caught my attention.

The article laid out the following points for the corporate libraries of the usual model:

• It described the warehouse model of information provision – acquisition, storage, classification of mostly printed materials and distribution on request
• Time spent not on living with information users but on “maintaining the stacks”
• Sources of information need to be tailored to the user’s requirements and the currency of the information (i.e. sources that are not books)
• Librarians acting as conduits between people & their tacit knowledge i.e. networking

The requirements of tomorrow’s information professionals were also laid out:

• Get out into business
• Actively assess who needs information and who has it – then help them to connect
• Focus on multiple media & how they can be exploited
• Develop an architecture of information
• Work with external providers to develop more useful vehicles for information
• Emphasize USAGE of information over control

The article did not lay out in details the how-to steps but over time the De Beers Marine Info Centre came to resemble that kind of service that Davenport and Prusak described and I will explain how we arrived at a version of the model that works for our company.

DE BEERS MARINE: 30 YEARS OF MARINE MINING

Thirty years might not represent a long time for the existence of a company, but within the marine mining industry we are a milestone company. We are the leaders in the industry and we intend to stay there, and to do so will require information.
De Beers Marine (DBM) started out as mining company that sold its services to the marine diamond-rich Namibia. The fleet was owned by the South African company which had access to the Cape Town harbour for modifications as Namibia does not have a dry dock that can cater for the size of the mining vessels.

Marine mining occurs via two methods: horizontal and vertical mining. Vertical mining is an outsourced buy-out process where the intellectual property remains with the vendor. Horizontal mining represents the new frontier for our pioneering company. Mining at depths of 130m under the sea level with an unmanned tool is a science, one built on ideas and information.

In order to remain at the peak of our business we need the continuation of the following:

- De Beers Group and Anglo American Group funding for technology upgrade projects;
- SAMSA and Survey Class certification for the mining vessels that act like platforms for the mining tools and which are aging at a pace – all, save one having been built in the 1970s;
- Continued access to concessions for sampling or mining – concessions might be anywhere in the world;
- Technology to sample or mine those concessions – technology built on the experience of what works and on the incorporation of new requirements to the technology.

The De Beers Marine Info Centre was created in 1997 at the height of the company’s success. The company had a large geological staff that had post graduate education and a large research and development and production engineering teams, together with two sampling vessels and six mining vessels.

The Info Centre followed the library model which revolved around identifying, storing and sourcing information but it worked in isolation from business and was always seen as a “nice to have”. It was decentralised into the business units that existed:

- Mineral Resources
- Technical Services
- Production
- Support Services, i.e. IT, HR, Security, Commercial Services

The staff component consisted of:

- 1 head of service
- 4 qualified librarians
- 8 contractual and 1 permanent support staff members

Over the ensuing years the company had a number of retrenchment exercises before it finally split in 2000 and became two entities: De Beers Marine (Pty) Ltd and De Beers Marine Namibia which was a company partially owned by the De Beers Group and the Government of the Republic of Namibia.
After the last retrenchment exercise in 2004 there were two permanent staff members left in the South African company of De Beers Marine (Pty) Ltd.

By 2009 the company was much leaner and consisted of the following profit centres:

- Technical Services
- Human Resources
- 2 Vessels with one laid up permanently
- Support Services, i.e. HR, Security, Commercial Services which had absorbed the IT function

The revenue streams were our established and new clients: De Beers Consolidated Mines, Aurumar (a newly formed joint venture), Namdeb and DBM Namibia.

The 2010 company restructuring of functions and profit generating business units resulted in the Info Centre function reporting into the Technical Support Unit and was renamed the Business Information Office which consisted of three permanent personnel and one shared IT support contractor.

Each has a profile that they manage:

- Business Enterprise Architect – Strategy
- Information Officer – Configuration & Document Management
- Software Engineer – Database Development & Maintenance
- Network Administrator – Back Office Support & Business Process Structuring

The organizational changes of the flattening of the reporting structures resulted in the following changes:

- Then – there was not platform/profile to build on
- Now – integrated into a service unit NOT as an add-on
- Then – separate library database, populated by Info Centre staff
- Now – configuration database which is used by all units & monitored and added to by the Configuration Administrator
- Then – no interaction with end-client, only internal employees
- Now – direct service provider to end-clients
A CASE IN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN DE BEERS MARINE

The mining of the South African Sea Areas (SASA) concession off the west coast of South Africa had long been the aim of the De Beers Group and by 2005 the different disciplines of DBM had designed a horizontal mining system that was capable of mining within the marine geological environment constraints identified.

The vessel Dock Express 20 was identified and purchased and then taken to England to be converted to a mining vessel. It was renamed the Peace in Africa and production started in SASA in 2007.

By 2010 the Peace in Africa was an overhead that could not be afforded in the SASA concessions and it was moved to trial mining in the Atlantic 1 concession off the Namibian coast. The vessel was officially sold in October 2012 to the sister company De Beers Marine Namibia, renamed the Mafuta and has been a raging success for their production due to its workhorse – the underwater, unmanned crawler that acts like a controlled tractor sucking up the ocean floor to deposit the geological matter in the onboard treatment plant.

The original crawler was designed with requirements that have surpassed by client expectations and the crawler design has evolved. The current design was intended to surpass the previous models and better controls on design, fabrication and installation have made the last design and installation project a success. The crawler consists of 10,000 items and 1500 subassemblies that are either fabricated or bought-out items. Most pieces are recorded as an engineering drawing or a data sheet on the company’s configuration system.

The direct value-add that was played by Information Management as a discipline was the following:

- Original data capturing from various sources: hardcopies, network, CDs
- Auditing of data captured by self or project team
- Audit of project documents
- Controlled, recorded transmittal of tender and fabrication data packs to vendors
- Workflow built by network administrator within the electronic document management system to enable tracking of work
- Learnings recorded within the same electronic document management system
- While the current crawler was being built, the fabrication of a second one based on the same design but making allowance for design improvements or differences of design were already being catered for within the document structure to ensure no future confusion.
Learnings represented by this case study for Information Management (IM):

- Due to better business processes supported by management and leaner thinking, the original vessel conversion operation was reduced from 18 months down to three (3) months. This is not a direct value-add of but in a company where the biggest complaint has been “I can’t find it” IM has had a direct, as yet uncalculated advantage to the process.
- The crawler design and fabrication process benefited from continuous auditing of technical records metadata and workflow to ensure that only the correct drawings went out for fabrication.
- Continuous communication with all the affected parties is crucial. The team responsible for the crawler consists of draughtsmen, design engineers, senior engineers for checking, procurement practitioners and vendors and all of them need to be kept abreast of what has been done, what is currently being done and will still come. The workflow process assisted a lot in this but when it comes to processes outside of the electronic document management system nothing replaces telephone calls and emails.
- Ideas and business processes without discipline and order are chaos. Discipline through continuous auditing of documentation, networking and training is key to success.
- Businesses processes supported with document management enabled is a force to be reckoned with, once the project team had been won over, other disciplines slowly followed using the single electronic document management system in which to record documented information.

In short, data and information are what I add value to by a lot of standardised inputting, auditing and training of the users’ work and information expectations.

If I can leave one message for the attendees of this conference and newly qualified librarians of the future it is:

- Not all information comes in printed formats
- Not all users come into libraries
- NETWORK NETWORK NETWORK

Or to misquote Barbara Fister reinventing some of Ranganathan’s Laws of Library Science to reflect market-based assumptions:

- Improve the customer experience.
- The library must grow its market or die.
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This paper would not be possible without the past 15 years of employment in what is still a pioneering field with the best of the best colleagues. I have found my niche in an industry that never still, never boring and forces you as an employee to keep evolving to ensure the service I represent is in line with the requirements of the different disciplines.

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REFERENCES


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