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Making a difference in the knowledge age at the New Zealand Parliamentary Library

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Abstract:

Knowledge management is a much-used term in our literature. What it means for Parliamentary Libraries and how much one can apply the principles and processes of knowledge management to the environment of a Parliament and particularly, the New Zealand Parliamentary Library, is the topic to be covered in this paper.

Parliaments are complex organisations in areas that are markedly different from corporate organisations. For instance, they are usually federal in structure, with four to five agencies held loosely together. A chief executive heads up a corporation and is responsible for ensuring the efficient and effective operation of the company. Generally, that is not so for Parliaments. Most corporations have a common goal and everyone in the company is working towards achieving the common goal. Generally, that is not so for Parliaments.

In a Parliamentary environment, not all the knowledge management processes are relevant or applicable. In our view, the most important component of a knowledge management programme is knowledge sharing. However, one must admit that to some extent, knowledge sharing is not a natural behaviour -- but all organisations have areas where they knowledge share -- though that activity may be done grudgingly. In Parliaments, the areas where knowledge is shared (even though grudgingly) are larger, and more institutionalised and unlikely to break down because of party boundaries and because Parliaments have strong core operations. Given that, what is useful for Parliamentary Libraries to reflect upon is the area of knowledge management.

Gartner Group has defined knowledge management as a (...) "discipline that promotes a collaborative and integrated approach to the creation, capture, organization, access and use of an enterprise's information assets. This includes databases, documents and, most importantly, the uncaptured, tacit expertise and experience of individual workers".
They define six knowledge processes:

- Knowledge sharing culture;
- Knowledge infrastructure;
- Leading a knowledge team;
- Managing knowledge processes;
- Establishing knowledge content, and;
- Evangelising knowledge.

In our view, some of these knowledge processes are more applicable to the work of parliamentary libraries than others.

Knowledge sharing culture

This is the most important knowledge process, and one that is openly recognized as the most difficult, because it requires a great deal of culture change. It is also the most problematic of all the knowledge processes for parliaments. Knowledge sharing does occur across party boundaries, but it is usually intensely political, carefully controlled and limited in nature. It does not lend itself to formalised, structured knowledge sharing systems and processes.

Administrative units can improve their knowledge sharing within their own unit and between administrative units. So there are opportunities for parliamentary libraries to improve knowledge sharing, from within the library, and also with other support units.

Knowledge infrastructure

This includes a range of technological tools that enable knowledge management. Generally, the technologies used are tools that permit:
◊ browse and search access to information;
◊ some profiling tools;
◊ push technology, and;
◊ a groupware or workflow tool that supports content creation, organisation and communications.

Many parliamentary libraries have browse and search tools, some have push tools, but most don't work with groupware or workflow tools. Generally the parliamentary library is a user of this infrastructure, possibly a heavy user, rather than as a key influencer or a partner in making infrastructure decisions along with IT professionals.

Leading a knowledge team

Parliamentary Library staff has many of the attributes of a knowledge team, in that they provide research and analysis, disseminate, acquire and organise knowledge, and frequently provide training in and promotion of the use of knowledge resources. A full KM team is likely to include people with roles that are unfamiliar to a parliamentary library, such as people who facilitate networks (groups of people talking to each other across the organisation and sharing knowledge in new ways) and knowledge initiative

managers who lead projects to change the knowledge sharing culture and to capture the intellectual capital of the organisation in structured systems.

Managing knowledge processes

Knowledge processes are identified as acquiring, structuring, organising, adding value, and deploying knowledge.   Librarians might describe those as acquisitions, cataloguing/
indexing and responding to information requests. Knowledge managers are likely to take more responsibility for the learning process, for instance in exploring what the users do with the information that has been disseminated to them. To move further along the knowledge management scale it would be useful to focus on providing solutions to questions like these:

- How could the New Zealand Parliamentary Library deploy information resources to make them easier for client use?

- How can we add value to the information so that it is quicker for clients to absorb the information and to apply the information to the decisions they must make?

- What training and tools should the NZ Library provide so that its clients can competently research the information resources available to them (including the internet) when they need to?

- How should the NZ Library integrate access to internal information as well as the more traditional published information that libraries have always provided?

- What information would the NZ Library's clients like to have access to on a one-stop-shop basis, and what are the existing Library initiatives that would allow to deliver on this?

- How should the NZ Library provide access to a wide range of formats to our clients beyond the printed documents that are familiar to the Library?

- What communication channels exist that integrate information across the whole of parliament?

- The nature of the Library's relationship with the communications channels, whether contributor or owner?

Establishing knowledge content

Establishing knowledge content includes building an information collection accompanied by a summary of its context and usefulness -- thereby making it possible for the right user to find the right piece of information at the right time. In many parliamentary libraries, research publications provide some aspects of this activity in that they provide analysis, context and information comparisons. As well, this activity can include aspects of document management such as version control and tracking of documents. Cataloguing and indexing fit into this activity, especially when those activities focus on the context and content of the information.

Evangelising knowledge

This process includes talking to our client base about what we do at every opportunity, in order to maximise the use and usefulness of the knowledge bases that we create. It includes measuring the value of what we do with customer surveys and other performance measurements. It also includes ownership of

knowledge channels, which might include bulletin boards, intranet chat groups or other ways of disseminating knowledge throughout parliaments.

Knowledge management initiatives at the NZ Parliamentary Library

Based on the above discussion of knowledge processes, to fully espouse knowledge management would require a radical broadening of the role of most parliamentary libraries. There is certainly no mandate to implement knowledge management in the New Zealand Parliament -- where the mandate barely allows moving beyond librarianship to information management! However, some aspects of knowledge management are being worked on. These include:

- Deepening our understanding of client information needs through a client liaison programme;

- Working with other parliamentary agencies to re-develop the parliamentary Intranet and Internet sites. In particular, we are working toward a lead role in structuring and organising knowledge and in user interfacing –including the browse and search tools that are provided;

- Involvement with e-government initiatives, particularly with metadata standards, allowing decisions on what changes to make to our own cataloguing and indexing processes -- thereby enabling easy integration of information in a range of formats and for a range of output devices (including WAP phones etc.);

- Reviewing our range of current awareness products so that they provide more targeted and filtered information -- quicker for our clients to read, more pertinent to them, and easier for them to use to inform them on the decisions they must make;

- Building relationships with other parliamentary agencies to increase the number of collaborative projects that look at the information flow across the whole of parliament in a way that responds to the needs of Members of Parliament rather than to traditional organisational boundaries.

Knowledge management is a discipline with strong links to librarianship, and with a certain degree of relevance to the work of parliamentary libraries. Some of the knowledge processes are relevant to parliamentary libraries and some are not. It is the responsibility of every parliamentary library, including the New Zealand Parliamentary Library, to examine what is useful to them from the knowledge management discipline and to initiate projects where appropriate.