

On Course for a Career in Information and Knowledge Management

evolving as its members evolve, it can rapidly enter the final phase of obsolescence and irrelevance to generations following in the leader's footsteps.

Conclusion

While associations have certainly existed since mediaeval times or even, arguably, since the beginning of humankind, the field of association management in its current incarnation is fairly new. When it comes time to hire an executive, professional associations increasingly recognize the unique skill set needed to help members and their

leaders operate to the very best of their ability. Not long ago, professional associations held to the belief that only an individual from the field should manage the association's business. Today, that is increasingly less and less the case. The development and promulgation of the Certified Association Executive designation helped communicate that associations advance best when in the hands of a CEO competent in the complexities of a voluntary enterprise.

And so, next time you ask and someone tells you that they are an association executive, I hope that you will be able to say, "I know *exactly* what you do!" You are sure to receive a big, warm smile in return.

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Jela Webb shares with us her experiences as one of the first recipients of a new professional qualification in knowledge management obtained from London Metropolitan University

Introduction

Back in late 1998 I was appointed to head up the Knowledge Management and Development Team in Nat West Bank and given responsibility for devising the strategy and implementing a knowledge management capability in The New Learning Organisation, the bank's centralised learning and development function. No mean feat when supporting 60,000 staff with their training and development needs!

Full of enthusiasm for this new area and fresh from completing an MBA, I was bursting with ideas but wanted to know:

- Where should I start?
- What should I focus on?



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- What have others done?
- What worked – what didn't?
- Were there any good practices I should be following?

At the time, KM was still relatively new in the UK but there was a feeling that this was not just a new management fad which would fade in the same way as other initiatives – TQM (Total Quality Management), BPR (Business Process Engineering) and the like, but that it was much more about culture and changing behaviours so that knowledge sharing became embedded within organisational processes.

I initially did a lot of background reading; the growth in KM related literature meant that there was no shortage of material to choose from! I attended conferences devoted to the

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subject, participated in seminars and research programmes as well as building a network of contacts with whom I could share thoughts and ideas. All extremely valuable and I learned a lot but what I also wanted was something more tangible that would give me a deeper grounding and would help me move forward along a KM career path. I had very early on decided that this was something I wanted to be involved in for the foreseeable future and was actively exploring ways in which I could develop and hone my skills.

Skills needed in the knowledge economy

In mid 1999 having spent a very challenging and enjoyable time implementing a very practical and leading edge KM capability, initiating a variety of projects, I attended a seminar, which explored the skills needed for the knowledge economy – I had in fact been interviewed by the researchers and in the true spirit of knowledge sharing was happy to talk about my role, my team and the varied skills we brought to the KM table. At the seminar something in particular struck a chord with me and that was the mention of a professional qualification in Information and Knowledge Management, which was to be offered by the University of North London (now London Metropolitan University). At the time this was the only qualification of its kind on offer in Europe although since its introduction there has been a fast-growing market in professional KM education.

MSc Information and Knowledge Management Programme

I listened intently to Eileen Milner, the course convenor, who explained that the University had first began to consult with employers about the development of a 'post-professional' post-graduate degree in information and knowledge management back in 1996 when the term 'knowledge management' was neither commonly known nor understood. The journey from 'new idea' to establishing a formal study programme had taken some time but excited by the thought that this might be just what I was looking for I obtained a prospectus, and enrolled myself on the MSc Information and Knowledge Management programme as a member of the very first cohort. Studies commenced in September 2000 and I finished the course in May 2002.

The following are my experiences of pursuing a professional qualification in KM.

Programme Structure

The course was originally designed to run over a two-year academic model of part-time study and is delivered through distance supported and residential modes, the

latter involving seven blocks of formal study run over three days usually including a day at the weekend. The residential sessions, which allow tutors and participants to meet, as well as offering the opportunity to build developmental and supportive networks, are intensive. A typical day starts at 8.30 am and lasts approximately 11 hours. During this time, as well as attending formal lectures we worked in small syndicates, examining problem-based case studies and undertook group presentations. Throughout, we were encouraged to engage with key issues in information and knowledge management and apply theoretical concepts to practice in terms of our own organisational experiences.

The mode of delivery had been carefully thought out and was designed to allow students to combine Masters level study with full time employment. In between the residential sessions, we were supported via web-based facilities. What happened in practice is that after meeting initially for our first residential session, the group working fostered the creation of a truly dynamic learning community where knowledge sharing became the norm. We met up between residential sessions to discuss and review assignments; we used bulletin boards, e-mails and chat rooms to share our experiences, issues and challenges. Participants on my course were equally split between the public and private sectors; this in itself provided a rich vein of experiences and allowed us all to learn across sectors, the common theme being an information and knowledge management agenda.

The University firmly believes that there is a pivotal relationship between the management of information and knowledge. Programme design deliberately ensured that due focus was given to information management, their argument being that to try and manage an intangible asset such as knowledge without first underpinning this by appropriate and effective information management strategies was to invite failure.

The modules studied reflect this and comprise six compulsory modules as well as a final dissertation.

The Syllabus

Year 1 Semester A

Managing Information in the Organisation

Explores key issues relating to the identification and management of information assets within organisational structures. Additionally, covers information auditing, the relationship between information management and supporting technologies and skills and competencies required for the information economy.

Managing Knowledge

Explores what is meant by 'knowledge' both tacit and explicit. Considers organisational culture and structure and the role of employees in relation to the achievement of effective knowledge management. Additionally, covers the identification and management of knowledge assets within a context and synergies with information management.

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Year 1 Semester B

Information and Knowledge Resources: organisation and management

Focuses on the design of systems to manage an organisation's information and knowledge resources, examining how they may be organised to improve the efficiency of search and retrieval.

Knowledge Applications

Imparts an understanding of current technological applications in managing information and knowledge within organisations. Additionally, assesses the project management implications and challenges associated with the introduction of knowledge applications to the organisation.

Year 2 Semester A

Legal Perspectives on Information and Knowledge Management

Provides an introduction and overview of the principal areas of law governing information, particularly in relation to new technologies. Covers UK national, EU and international legislative and legal provisions and decisions relevant to information management.

Research and Evaluation Strategies for Information and Knowledge Management

Focuses on the deployment of a range of research and evaluation techniques to support a business case for adoption and development of information and knowledge management strategies. Informs the approach to the final project (see below).

Year 2 Semester B

Information and Knowledge Management Project

The programme culminates in a project, of the student's choice, relating to an aspect of information and knowledge management. In liaison with a supervisor, students develop a methodology, carry out research and write a dissertation of 12,000 words.

Assessment

Each module is assessed by course work which has to be produced in a specified format, typically an analytical report, although there are two assessed oral presentations within the programme.

Delivery

The distance-based model, supplemented by the residential worked well as it enabled students to manage the process of academic study alongside busy professional lives. My fellow students came from a broad range of sectors – local and central government, management consultancy, the construction industry and the police force to name a few; this ensured that debates were always

lively. Representation is predominantly UK based although subsequently there have been participants from Ireland, France and Jordan.

There is a good fit with the 'world of work' with the emphasis being on practical application of theory and it is a requirement that students should be working within an organisation during the period of study although, exceptionally, this requirement may be waived. Assignments are focused on applying the learning in an organisational context so any students who are not working in an organisational environment would, I feel, be at a disadvantage when completing the assignments. Indeed, they would have to be very persuasive in interview and demonstrate that they would have access to organisations in which to apply the theories, to be accepted as a student on the programme.

Because we were actively encouraged to share our experiences and we would only be paying lip service to KM if we didn't, we learned almost as much from each other as we have from the formal coursework – everyone was willing to put their experience to use both during the residential and in peer reviews of assignments.

Networking

We established a community of practice early on and this networking has continued since we completed our MSc's. We meet up at least twice a year as a whole group and in between times smaller groups have supported each other. One of the advantages of study is the network built up not only with fellow students and lecturers but also with other practitioners and consultants who have presented sessions on the programme. There is a policy of inviting visiting speakers; they offer a practitioner's insight into IKM issues and are popular with the students.

These contacts all provide valuable support and so far, lead me to believe that they will be a career long networking asset.

Why study for a professional qualification?

Knowledge management has now become an accepted business discipline and organisations across the industrial sectors have created roles for knowledge managers. For some individuals, the range of information available from literature, to conferences, to seminars, to industry journals, to websites will be enough but others will be keen to gain a professional qualification and distinguish themselves from the pack as they move along a KM career path.

Employers seeking to recruit staff into senior information and knowledge management roles accept that knowledge managers come from very diverse backgrounds. The MSc equips students with key underpinning skills, around organising information and knowledge management for use, as well as ensuring that they are well placed to meet the challenges presented by working in the knowledge

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economy. In the 21st century organisation, knowledge managers should exhibit high-level awareness of asset management, performance measurement and strategic planning – these are all skills that the MSc in Information and Knowledge Management prioritises.

Was the programme of study useful? For me, it has been a very worthwhile experience. I am now working as a consultant, lecturer and trainer in KM and being able to add this qualification to my CV helps to establish my credentials with potential clients. Having firstly obtained the practical experience, I have now supplemented this by a formal academic qualification which has made me even better equipped to offer my clients professional expertise and knowledge of the subject and help them to really reap the benefits knowledge sharing brings.

Through attending the course, I have established a wider network with other KM professionals and as a consequence of forming relationships with fellow students, academic staff and visiting speakers I have benefited by being invited to work on some interesting assignments. For example, I was invited to participate in a workshop, run by the Foreign Office in Ireland where I presented a session on 'Implementing a KM Programme' I have written material for a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Specialist Elective 'Managing Organisational Knowledge and Learning' for their professional qualification. One of the visiting professors is a Director of a company specialising in strategic advice, training and recruitment in KM and I have become an Associate and I am hoping shortly to work with her on developing an information literacy programme for a major public sector client. Towards the end of 2003, I ran the first two modules of the MSc programme for London Metropolitan University – it certainly was an interesting experience going back as a visiting lecturer on the programme where a couple of years ago I was one of the students!

Conclusions

Anecdotal evidence suggests that a professional qualification in KM is of value. KM is an emerging discipline, there is no set career path; a straw poll of knowledge managers confirms that they have different aspects to their role depending upon their own organisational structures. By building on the foundations of practical work experience, a professional qualification enables the student to make the transition to a higher level of awareness in this dynamic arena. Don't just take my word for it here's what a few of my fellow students say about the course:

Jela Webb is an independent consultant, lecturer, author and trainer in information and knowledge management. She has implemented KM programmes in FTSE 100 companies and in collaboration, developed 'The Integrated Learning Model' combining traditional training with online learning and knowledge management. She has presented at national and international conferences, participated in research and facilitated discussion forums on KM and e-leadership.

Jela is the author of the Ashridge Business School *Learning Guide to Knowledge Management*, a visiting university lecturer and is currently researching and writing a report on KM in small and medium sized enterprises. She may be contacted at jela.webb@azione.co.uk

Bill Wood
Knowledge Manager
Essex County Council

'It's been a really valuable experience, especially the close tie-in with work-related activities'

Andy Jamieson
Business Analyst
Foster Wheeler Energy Ltd

'It really challenges you to think and makes you look at business in a different way ... from a perspective where information and knowledge are seen as key organisational assets. The course helped me to understand and appreciate why the management of these valuable resources is so important to continuing business success'

'I've valued the opportunity to work with experienced professionals in the information and knowledge management arena and have developed personally and professionally through my studies'

Alison Wyatt
Project Manager
Open University

My role in the University covers a number of areas: the development of our Information Strategy, 'information projects' such as audits, 'knowledge sharing' projects, and legislative compliance – every module of the course related in some way to one of these areas, and I could relate all the assignments to 'real' initiatives and projects that I was carrying out at work, even my dissertation. The course helped me in a practical way to achieve results, rather than being simply a tiresome burden necessary to achieve a qualification"

"The opportunity to meet colleagues in the field has been invaluable, we have learned an awful lot about and from each other and a strong sense of community has developed. I hope that we continue to learn and share in this way after the course has finished – I suspect we will as we already interact and work with each other outside the bounds of the course"

In the knowledge economy, many organisations are keen to demonstrate that they are knowledge centric; this is in turn giving knowledge managers a high profile and best placed to succeed in their chosen KM career.