

Understanding and Supporting Your Organization's Business Drivers

BY TAKING A FEW SIMPLE STEPS, INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS CAN KEEP ABREAST OF THE OVERALL OBJECTIVES OF THEIR ORGANIZATIONS AND THEN DEVELOP STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THEM.

BY ALEXANDER VAN BOETZELAER, MA

An October 2013 report, *The Evolving Value of Information Management*, published jointly by the *Financial Times* and SLA, identified “understanding the drivers” of an organization as a key attribute of today’s information professional. It turns out that acquiring such an understanding is often easier said than done.

Intuitively, one would think that if you’re hired by or already working for an organization, you know what its goals are and, by extension, what drives it. But these things can change, and unless you’re constantly aware and have built a strong internal communications network, you may miss out.

That’s especially true for information professionals. As one of the business

executives interviewed for the report commented, knowledge managers traditionally are perceived as “not in the ball game.” That perception may be valid.

Today’s information professionals can’t afford to be left on the sidelines. Start today to achieve a solid understanding of your organization’s current business drivers, determine how you can support those drivers, and let others know the value of that support.

Getting in the Game

The adage “knowledge is power” applies not only to what information professionals have to offer, but also what they stand to gain by tuning in to an organization’s key drivers. Many

organizations, whether in the corporate or academic realm, continually re-examine their business model to stay competitive. In the process, they may change their business drivers (beyond those of making a profit and ensuring a return on investment). Such changes can have a significant impact on your role in, and value to, the organization.

In a recent blog post, “Setting the Scene for Disruptive Innovation,” John Danaher, president of education for nursing and health professions at Elsevier, gave several examples of companies that transformed their thinking about their business. Xerox, for instance, realized it wasn’t simply making copy machines, but was actually in the knowledge distribution business. Similarly, Apple recognized that

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it wasn't just producing hardware, but was also in the business of supporting multiple streaming content platforms (Danaher 2015). More recently, GE has transformed from a manufacturer into a digital business.

Elsevier itself is in the process of evolving from a legacy publisher to a provider of information solutions and analytics, and the way we handled the development and launch of a new product for nursing and allied health professionals is emblematic of our transformation. Instead of relying on our traditional product development process and staff, we put together a multidisciplinary team from a cross-section of the organization, selecting innovative thinkers regardless of their job title or level. They worked like a start-up company, ensconced in a small office in New York, free of their usual day-to-day job responsibilities.

The success of that process (as well as the resulting product) has transformed our thinking, some of our business drivers, and our hiring priorities. Our need for experienced information professionals who understand and can support our current objectives has never been greater.

Granted, not every knowledge professional wants to work in a “disruptive” environment or manner, but it behooves you to understand what you're getting into if you're looking for a job. And if you're working for an organization that's in transition, you need to understand what that transition means for you in your current position.

Staying Informed

If you haven't been staying abreast of your organization's direction and drivers, there are several ways to get up to speed. The strategies are similar whether you're working in academia or in a corporate setting.

Explore the website. Jay Bhatt, liaison librarian for engineering at Drexel University in Philadelphia and a frequent collaborator on Elsevier's educational initiatives, said he regularly visits Drexel's website to review both the university's overall strategic objectives and initiatives and those specific to its librar-

ies. Doing so enables him to not only stay aware of the university's current focus, but also to identify the objectives and initiatives that Drexel's libraries are best able to support.

These include “global impact” and “research innovation,” two areas librarians are well positioned to help. Global impact is a fertile environment for librarians because of the tremendous amount of collaboration that occurs between scientists and researchers worldwide, while research innovation offers a multitude of opportunities for librarians to teach information skills to students, faculty members, and researchers themselves and help them stay aware of current international research in their respective fields.

Read the marketing and financial communications. Britt Mueller, principal at InfoLiquid LLC in San Diego, says that a company's current goals, focus, and values often are clarified in its marketing and financial communications (the latter targeted toward Wall Street). She advocates reading such communications carefully every time they come out, especially to identify and understand drivers for new business opportunities.

Participate in meetings. Although it may be tempting to skip meetings because of time constraints, they can be vital to enhancing your awareness of what's going on in the organization. They also offer opportunities to discuss the projects you're working on and garner support from others, especially higher-ups.

Engage in informal discussions. Bhatt stresses the benefits of engaging in informal conversations with colleagues and end users. In a post on the Drexel Libraries blog, “Where on Campus is Jay Bhatt? Drexel's Embedded Librarian,” he is quoted as saying, “With more students, new departments, and new faculty members, it becomes all the more important for a liaison librarian to keep informed [of] departmental needs” (Lee 2014).

To stay informed, Bhatt makes himself available in student lounges two days a week, providing coaching and

guidance to students and faculty while learning about their current projects. If he spent his days sitting in the library, he would miss opportunities to help his end users, understand their shifting needs and focus, and reinforce his own value to the university.

On the corporate side, Mueller also advocates talking to end users, especially those working in areas of the company generating high revenue or involved closely with future strategic direction, to understand their goals and objectives. She advises “walking up the value chain”—that is, talking to higher-level influencers, such as the people who control budgets and decide where the company's resources should be directed.

Taking Stock, Taking Action

Having a firm grasp of the organization's business drivers at every level puts you in a position to demonstrate that understanding in ways that support your colleagues and end users and further your career.

Sometimes, opportunities to act on your knowledge of business drivers are right in front of you—you just need to take advantage of them. For example, Bhatt took the lead in the most recent Engineering Academic Challenge, a five-week game sponsored by Elsevier that is played by thousands of engineering students worldwide. Bhatt put together a small group of Drexel engineering students and worked with them over several months to develop what he called “real-world engineering questions, inspired by National Academy of Engineering Grand Challenge themes” (Bhatt and Christe 2016).

In “Epic Wins: Engaging Students Globally with Game-based Learning,” Bhatt and co-author Daniel Christe (2016) state, “The Engineering Academic Challenge may be a game, but it is also a thoughtful and deliberate way to engage learners across the world, while supporting the four key directions of Drexel University Libraries' current strategic plan.” Broadly, those key directions encompass the library's business drivers through 2017: (1)

ensuring access to ideas and authoritative information sources, (2) deepening the university's connections with scholarship, (3) building learning environments in physical and cyber spaces, and (4) modeling a collaborative and entrepreneurial library organization to serve students, enhance teaching, and support researchers.

When opportunities to act on business drivers don't present themselves, you will need to reach out. But first, Mueller advises, be sure you are clear about what you have to offer.

"You've got to be clear," she says. "Ask, 'What am I doing that's providing value—not just peripheral value, but true value—to the people I'm working with and for?'"

Answering that question may involve some soul searching, as well as research. Knowledge management consultant Ulla de Stricker offers this approach:

Let us find out as much as we can about the priority activities in the organizations we serve and then devise and promote the optimal mix of services, tools, and content to support those activities . . . Something as relatively straightforward (for us) as curating project-related materials or revamping an intranet interface for greater usability could yield practical value in short order . . . but we must get to the point of accepting that, yes, we are in that business now: anyone with LIS credentials is potentially 'in the business' of working with any process, system, or tool an organization uses to support its operations. Our skills are applicable universally to today's evolving business practices . . . [We] just need to acknowledge that fact and turn that acknowledgment to good use. (de Stricker 2015)

Once you've accepted that you have multiple skills that are of value, you need to demonstrate that value in terms the organization can understand. As de Stricker explains:

[I]t is particularly important for information professionals to have practiced the 'scary stuff' of business cases, ROI assessments, and similar analyses so as to sell their skills into new roles. In other words, information professionals face an employment landscape in which they are, in effect, required to sell potential employers on the desirability of creating new positions where unique information skills will contribute to organizational goals. Established information center managers are similarly required to demonstrate the value and ROI of the infrastructure costs they incur for the parent organization; they are in effect becoming agents for hiring and deploying information professionals working directly with subject matter experts. Scary, yes; doable, yes. (de Stricker, 2015).

Armed with a strong handle on your value and how to express it in terms that support the business drivers, it's time to craft a "cogent, concise, and well-structured message," Mueller stresses. That message is not, "Let me tell you what I can do for you." The message starts with two questions—namely, "What are you struggling with in terms of information?" and "How can I help support that?" Then tailor what you can do to the needs of the people you're talking to.

Keep in mind that you're not approaching people hat in hand. "You are an equal partner at the table, trying to solve the same problems, trying to make the company successful," Mueller says. "You're trying to get to a mutual understanding, and you're trying to build a relationship. If you can do that, you're in good stead. You're going to have some successes and some flops, but you need to push forward."

Looking Ahead

Simply put, once you understand the organization's drivers, do something meaningful with that knowledge. Secure in your skills, and knowing how to quickly determine the overarching driv-

ers of any business—e.g., by looking at the website and reading current communications from and about the organization—you are in a good position to show value in your current role or interview for a new one within your organization or elsewhere.

Given the changing landscape of knowledge management, it is important to stay flexible and avoid pigeonholing yourself. As John Danaher (2015) wrote, "The CEOs of Airbnb and Uber didn't come from the hotel or transportation businesses. They brought a fresh pair of eyes, and because they did, they came up with innovative services."

You can, too. **SLA**

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