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Corporate

The evolving value of information management

And the five essential attributes of the modern information professional.

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Foreword

This report is the result of a research study commissioned by both the Financial Times and the Special Libraries Association (SLA), to explore the evolving value of information management in today's society.

Reflecting the opinions of both information professionals (providers) and senior executives (users) worldwide, the aim is to identify the opportunities to enhance the value of information management to business and provide an actionable framework for the continuing success of the information function in any organisation.

"Big data" and the proliferation of new technologies are shortening the time to an answer, and yet also causing many new challenges for both users and providers. Although this research shows contrasting perspectives between providers and users, many of the root causes of the issues are the same. Both suffer from information overload and spend too much valuable time filtering for information that is useful (relevant, accurate and timely). To overcome this, both parties must use a deeper understanding of the organisation-wide strategy and business values to frame priorities in how information is used.

There are now many alternatives for information professionals and information centres. It is the responsibility of information providers to solidify themselves as the best solution to their organisation's information needs and reinforce the value they provide.

We encourage information professionals to question how the strategies in this report can assist you in enhancing the value you offer. We encourage executives to use the report to explore how to increase productivity through better use of information. Case studies are presented to help you work with information professionals and use their skills to maximise your organisation's potential.

We hope that you will be as motivated by this study as we are, and will approach it with an introspective eye on how you will inspire success for yourself and for others.

Finally, SLA would like to take this opportunity to extend a special thanks to the Financial Times for spearheading this pertinent and necessary project to drive the information profession forward.

Caspar de Bono,
Managing Director B2B,
Financial Times

Kate Arnold,
SLA President-Elect

Executive Summary

Once the custodians of dusty paper libraries, today's information professionals work with digital tools in virtual repositories.

This report explores the challenges and opportunities of this modern day knowledge specialist, working in times of widespread budget austerity, while evolving the value they provide to organisations.

Big data and smarter technology can make today's information professional more influential than ever, but the free availability of information is sometimes a threat. No longer data gatekeepers, information professionals must work hard to demonstrate their value in new ways. Doing this means making a fundamental shift from isolated, technical expert to multi-skilled team member, enabling decisions and proactively integrating into the organisation.

Some key themes emerged from the survey data and in-depth interviews which underpin this report:

1. What worries knowledge providers most is that an increasing number of their colleagues are bypassing them and accessing the information they need directly (e.g. using Google). Apart from undermining information professionals, this creates significant organisational risk. The second major, but related, challenge for information professionals is demonstrating their value to the business. Many are also struggling to meet organisational expectations in an environment of declines in budget, IT investment and headcount.

2. Information users (e.g. executives) suffer from information overload. Their challenge is a perceived lack of up-to-date, relevant, decision-ready information, delivered quickly enough for them to make use of it.

3. The majority of knowledge providers currently overestimate the level of value they provide. Overall, 55% of knowledge providers say they add "a lot of value", yet only 34% of executives are willing to say the same of them.

4. But executives appear more ready than ever to engage with information professionals. Some 49% of information users expect the level of interaction and engagement between knowledge providers and senior management to increase in the next three years.

5. One key way in which this engagement is set to increase is through the use of "embedded" information professionals. This will see information departments shrink or disappear, but will also dismantle many organisational barriers. Rather than being siloed in libraries, information professionals will become team members within departments that were once internal customers.

6. Communication, understanding and decision-ready information are rated (by all respondents) as the most important attributes for modern information professionals. They are also among the areas with the largest shortfalls in performance ratings between users and providers, so information professionals should focus on improving these attributes above all others.

Our survey, interview and research findings have driven the development of five essential attributes for modern information professionals to strive for:

- #1 – Communicate your value
- #2 – Understand the drivers
- #3 – Manage the process
- #4 – Keep up on technical skills
- #5 – Provide decision-ready information

Each of these is addressed in turn in the second half of this report, leading to an action-oriented conclusion which sets out 12 key tasks modern information professionals must complete in order to develop the five essential attributes.

Overall, the message is positive. While this research identifies and acknowledges both the threats and challenges that face information professionals, we also uncover unprecedented opportunities. In a knowledge economy swirling with bewildering amounts of data – of varying quality – and with ever more powerful data systems and tools developing every year, now is the time for the information profession to reach for new heights.

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Chapter 1

A profession in transformation.

Information management is at a crossroads. It is one of the oldest organisational disciplines, yet also one that has been completely reborn in the digital revolution. In an era of big data and the knowledge economy, it remains an essential service, yet organisations are cutting costs and more and more information management professionals[1] are battling to demonstrate their value.

The core skills and capabilities required by information professionals are changing. In the past, this was a discipline that was often hived off from the wider organisation. Today, however, information professionals are expected to communicate constantly with the rest of the organisation, integrate themselves into new areas, build key and productive relationships, and proactively demonstrate their value to senior colleagues. At the same time, they must retain their core technical capabilities, which remain indispensible across many disciplines. The result is a need for information professionals to possess a much broader set of skills and a trend for the profession to attract recruits from ever more diverse backgrounds.

In this report we explore this new world of the information professional. Our survey data reveals how executives who use information feel about the knowledge providers who supply it. We pull out the most important challenges and performance statistics recorded in the study to lay out a successful path forward for the information function in any organisation. Finally, we outline the five essential attributes needed by modern information professionals.

Our research contrasts responses from both information professionals and corporate executives in organisations that have dedicated information departments. Overall we surveyed 882 people, 83% of whom were information professionals, across a wide range of sectors.[2] Findings from the online study are supplemented by several interviews with information providers and users. The depth of the research and the diversity of industries studied give our conclusions broad applicability across all companies, organisations and agencies.

Percentage of responses by sector

[1] As is typical for a profession in transition, a new nomenclature has emerged in – what we will call – information management. Most similarly it is called knowledge management, which we will use synonymously, but numerous other labels exist. Similarly, professionals engaged in the industry are given all manner of job titles, including information analysts, knowledge providers, strategic analysts, data managers, and many others. We will use information/knowledge professional and information/knowledge provider synonymously in this report for simplicity.
[2] More information about this research and its participants can be found at the end of this report.

Chapter 2

Challenges and opportunities.

> *"It is a major challenge to get our management to understand the value of what we are capable of and how we contribute to the success of the corporation, while budgets and staffing are decreasing – trying to do more with less on both counts is not working!"*
>
> **Knowledge provider**

Budgets are tight
The most pressing challenge for many knowledge providers today is a decline in budget, IT investment and headcount. Capital investments in knowledge or information areas are required by the majority of those professionals surveyed, with 58% describing the level of investment in technology and process improvement as too low. Many in the industry can remember much richer times. "In previous years, if someone came up with a good idea, we would just do it," recalls a CIO of a large financial institution. "In the current climate, while I might have ten ideas, I can't work on all of them and I can't spend as much money. I have to prioritise those that are most important and just focus on those."

Financial services (which includes, for this research, accountancy and insurance) stands out as the area moving most against the grain on budgets and staff. Respondents from these organisations are enjoying increased budgets (a 5% net increase) and more headcount (a 9% increase). However, some 57% of knowledge providers in financial services believe more investment in technology and process improvements is necessary to achieve organisation-wide success.

Perhaps unsurprisingly – with so much austerity in public spending – organisations in education and academia (14% net decrease) and government and politics (43% net decrease) have suffered the greatest budget cuts. These two areas have also been hit by staff reduction, with falls of 4% and 25% respectively, and are calling the loudest for more investment into technology and process improvement.

Contrasting challenges
This research uncovers a clear and revealing contrast between the challenges identified by those who manage and provide information ('providers') and those executives who employ information provided by knowledge centres in their organisation ('users').

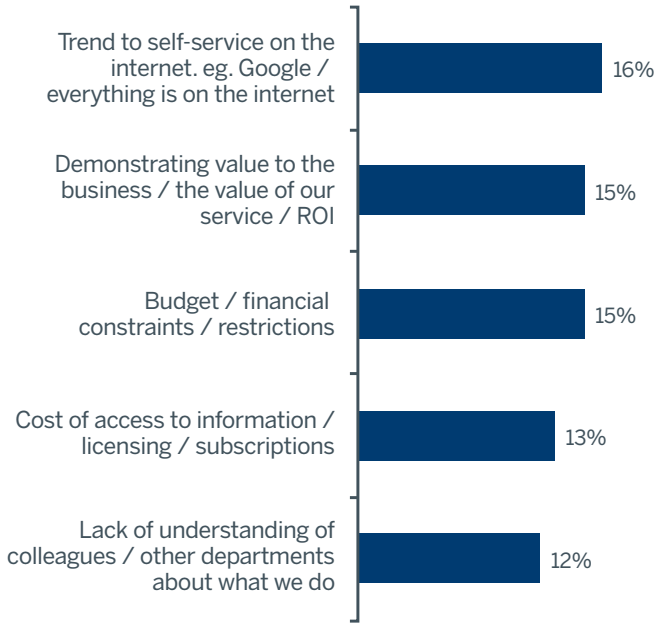
The users describe a frustrating situation of information overload.

They spend valuable time having to filter through information provided while frequently questioning the relevance of what they find. They also need information to be more up to date and provided more quickly.

To combat information overload however, both users and especially providers must wield a deeper understanding of organisation-wide strategy and business values.

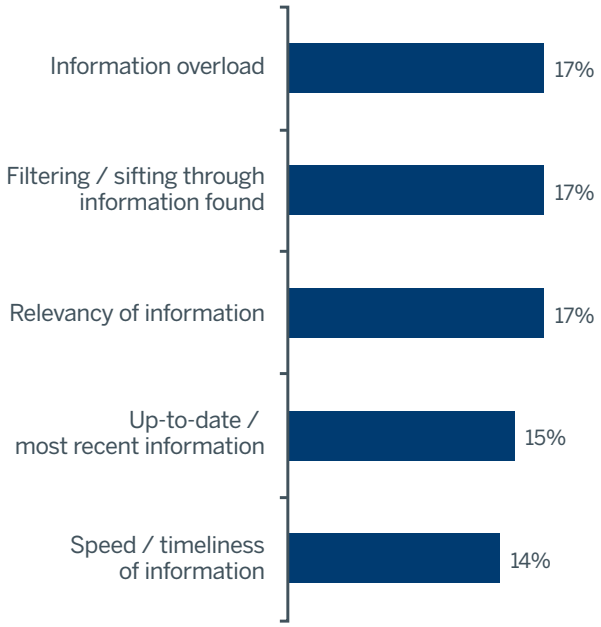
The information providers tell quite a different story. They are hampered by constraints on their budgets and have to absorb greater costs. Many also feel that other departments and colleagues have a poor understanding of the work they do and that it is a major challenge for them to demonstrate the value they offer. As one knowledge provider summed it up: "we face a lack of time, a lack of influence and a lack of money."

Knowledge providers top 5 cited challenges



Base: All knowledge providers (728)

Executives top 5 cited challenges



Base: All executives who have a knowledge department (92)

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Just Google it

The top cited challenge among knowledge providers, however, is that an increasing number of their colleagues are bypassing them entirely, accessing the information they need directly from online sources. This undermines the role of the knowledge provider, removes them as information gatekeeper and exposes the organisation to the risk of employing weak, outdated or false data.

In the words of an information professional at a large financial institution: "There is an increasing perception that people should be able to do their own research. The view is, 'we give them the Internet, we give them Google, let them get on with it'."

In response, information professionals need to demonstrate the value of their specialisation – a value that carries weight whether their users are turning directly to them or to a publicly available engine like Google for information discovery. The key action for information professionals is to get closer to colleagues and prove to them what is possible. "It goes back to a relationship where you can demonstrate to your colleagues that you can find better information, or find something they would never be able to locate on their own," says Daniel Lee, senior manager for PwC Canada's knowledge management operations.

It is up to information professionals to show their colleagues how they add value by using their skills across a range of sources.

Many information users are not aware of the most effective methods of search, whether on Google or a subscription-based engine. "It's shocking to me how long Google has been around and yet people are still terrible searchers," remarks Jan Combopiano, Vice President & Chief Knowledge Officer at Catalyst, a non-profit research organisation.

Information users should also be constantly reminded of the value of subscription services, which they cannot access in public searches. As Mr Lee puts it: "There's a whole layer of the web that's just not publicly available and that's where most of the best information is, but people don't even know that."

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What to do about "Google syndrome"
Whether they called it the "unedited Internet," "Google syndrome," "the Google myth" or "Google mentality" – respondents in this study cited the "misconception that everything is on Google and free" as an enormous problem for the industry. However, executives will not stop using Google anytime soon so information professionals need a strategy to suit the times. This starts by abandoning the thinking that the information professional is an alternative to free internet search. Instead, they need to demonstrate that they are the best solution for the organisation irrespective of the free availability of online information.

Doing this is of critical importance in many organisations. "There are many proprietary databases and resources that no one can access except members or librarians. The important concept to get across to administrators is that they do not know what they do not know," explains an information professional in the healthcare sector. "I am concerned that healthcare will be a disaster if physicians using Google searches, even PubMed, will use only what they find and think it is the most evidence-based quality material available." Many in other sectors share similar concerns.

Information professionals need to make sure that organisational leaders understand the risk, and eventual impact, of bad information, and the vast gulf between amateur Internet searching and the services of a trained information professional equipped with quality tools. As one respondent puts it, the profession needs to fight for "recognition that even with the Internet, librarians are still necessary; maybe even more necessary than ever."

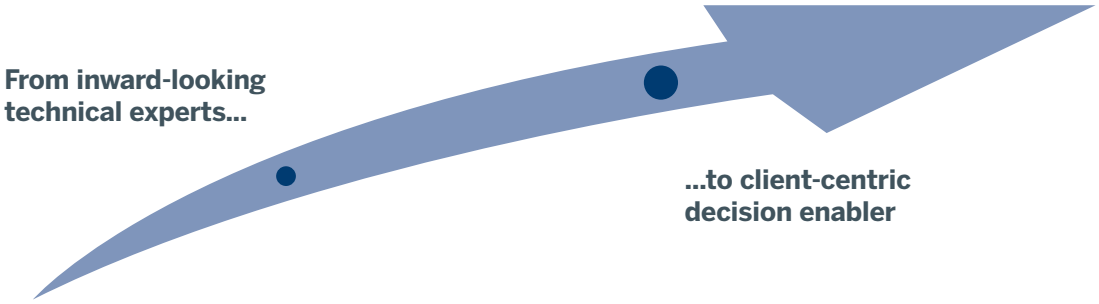
Actions:
1. Prove to your colleagues that you can access, or teach them to access, more information than they can do in isolation without your support. Educate them by demonstrating that your sources are more robust, and that you can add value in the way you combine, analyse and deliver information.
2. Prove the risks of bad information (this makes Google syndrome your ally): demonstrate what can go wrong and cite examples from other organisations; highlight (in a positive way) instances of incorrect or irrelevant information; and demonstrate differences between data from public sources vs. subscription services and link these back to organisational risk.
3. Make sure you prove both of the above – again and again – to senior management. Your colleagues' bosses and their superiors should be your advocates, instructing everyone beneath them to benefit from your skills.

What executives can do better
In many organisations, neither side of the "information fence" is satisfied. In the pages that follow, we will examine how executives can help knowledge centres to understand their needs. That means being aware of limitations, understanding how long tasks should take and being careful to formulate information requests precisely. Many executives could also get more out of their information colleagues by being open to a new way of working. This will dismantle whatever barriers exist, so that the information professional becomes "embedded" as an integral member of their team or department.

The most important priority for executives is to understand the deeper value to the organisation of strong information. As we will go on to explain, it is largely up to information professionals to demonstrate this value. However, whether in the form of increased profits or decreased risk, good information is a strategic business advantage. Any executive today needs to embrace that idea and, in doing so, get closer to the information professional and their tools.

The big challenge for information professionals
Nevertheless, information professionals have the most work to do in transforming their profession and actively demonstrating their value to the organisation. They must make a fundamental shift from being isolated, technical experts to being multi-skilled team members who enable decisions and proactively integrate themselves into the organisation. Failing to do this will leave information management as a secondary part of the organisation – not part of the "real work" in the eyes of executives.

Executives are expecting more from information professionals
Encouragingly, despite a growing deluge of information from ever increasing sources, executives appear more ready than ever to engage with information professionals. Some 49% of information users in this survey expect the level of interaction and engagement between knowledge providers and senior management to increase in the next three years.[3]



Old model for information management:

- Technical experts
- Inward looking & reactive
- Gathering
- Provide information to others
- Work in a silo
- Unclear metrics
- In information providers' comfort zone

New model for information management:

- Multi-skilled
- Outward looking & proactive
- Distilling and validating
- Coach others to self serve better
- Integrated within the organisation
- Clear metrics linked to strategy
- Out of information providers' comfort zone

[3] The legal sector is the only exception, where contact is expected to remain the same (50%) or decrease (17%), which may be a product of their long-established and often sophisticated information centres.

Chapter 3

Performance gaps.

"Demonstrating value in an increasingly online world means showing users that a library or information centre is a service, not a physical space."

Knowledge provider

So what does it mean for information providers to become "client-centric decision enablers"? One way of conceptualising this is to look at the stark difference in performance assessments between providers and users of information services in organisations today. Consumers of the information provided are more than colleagues – they are the client and customer of the knowledge centre or function. As a result, engaging productively with them – and adding real value to the business in the process – should be the number one goal of the knowledge management function.

It is therefore concerning that the majority of knowledge providers currently overestimate the level of value they provide.

Overall, 55% of knowledge providers say they add "a lot of value", yet only 34% of executives are willing to say the same.

This deviation is greatest in the government sector, where knowledge providers believe they "add a lot of value" (50%) at well over three times the rate of their colleagues (14%). In the legal sector, the performance perception gap is also large: some 64% of legal knowledge providers testify to the high value of their services – the highest score among all the sectors – but only 33% of their legal colleagues agree.

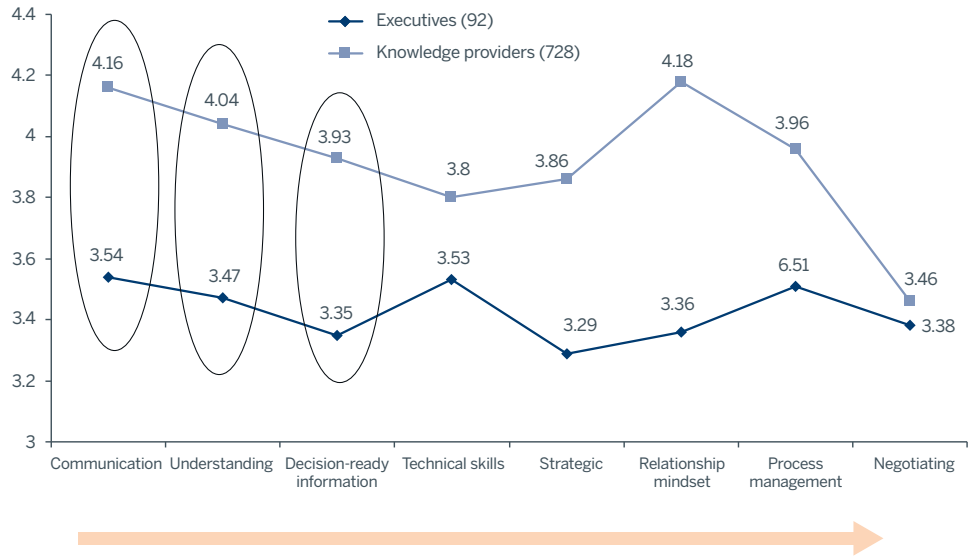
Proportion of those who believe that knowledge professionals add 'a lot of value'...			
Sectors	**Knowledge providers**	**Executives / users**	**Performance gap (in percentage points)**
Legal	64%	33%	31
Education / academia	57%	33%	24
Scientific / technical services / engineering	44%	53%	-9
Financial services (including accountancy and insurance)	44%	30%	14
Government / politics	50%	14%	36
All sector mean	**55%**	**34%**	**21**

A notable exception is in the scientific, technical and engineering sectors, where executives actually rate the performance of knowledge providers nine percentage points higher than the knowledge providers themselves. This could be because these sectors are more fundamentally dependent on data and have therefore developed knowledge professionals who know exactly how to deliver value to their information users.

The biggest gaps

For most sectors though, accepting that the performance gaps, as outlined in the section above, exist and need attention is the first step towards a progressive response. While communication, understanding and decision-ready information are rated as the most important attributes for modern information professionals, they are also – quite strikingly – among the areas with the largest shortfalls in performance ratings between users and providers.

Performance gaps identified for three key areas:
Communication, understanding and providing decision-ready information



*For definition of service aspects, please see page 33

Base: All knowledge providers (728)

Base: All executives who have a knowledge department (92)

With budget cuts hovering over many knowledge centres, closing these performance gaps is a matter of urgency. In the chapters that follow we look at five essential attributes needed for success in the new era of knowledge management, providing key methods that information professionals can use to bridge these gaps.

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Information professionals in 2008 compared to 2013
Back in 2008, the SLA, the association for information professionals and their strategic partners, conducted a survey of providers and users of information, called *The SLA Alignment Survey*. It asked respondents, among other things, to identify the "most valuable information roles". Our survey is similar in many ways and now, five years on, it highlights some key differences between then and now.

Top 5 most important/valuable service aspects for information providers: then and now[4]	
SLA Alignment Survey 2008	**FT and SLA research 2013**
1. Making information available to the desktop	1. Communication
2. Conducting research on users' behalf	2. Understanding (the business, the drivers, the usage)
3. Providing training on search/use of information	3. Provides decision-ready information
4. Providing competitive intelligence information	4. Technical skills
5. Managing a physical library and print collection	5. Strategic

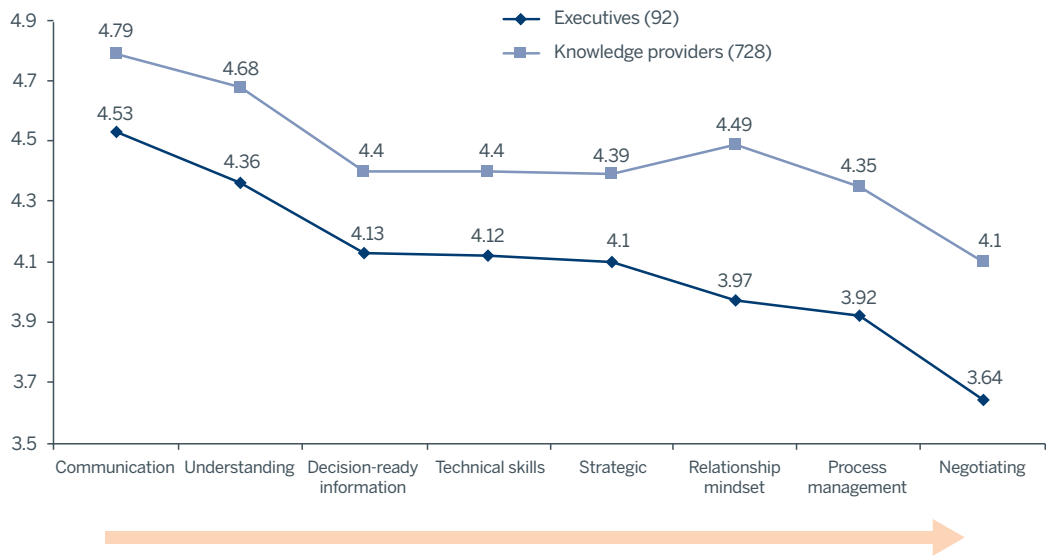
The top five service aspects in 2008 included more technical attributes and more segregated functions. Information professionals felt their role was to make good information available while managing a useful library. They would conduct research for their executive colleagues on request and provide training to help other parts of the business access information.

Since then, however, a fundamental shift has occurred. The most important aspects today involve greater integration with the business and a move from just making information available to ensuring that it is immediately usable. Having a deep understanding of why information is needed, how it will be used and how the business works is now key, as is the ability to engage and communicate with other parts of the business. Technical skills, while still important, are now a baseline prerequisite onto which information professionals must now build teamwork, initiative and more strategic thinking.

[4] Both studies surveyed both providers and users of information with providers being the largest group in both studies.

Broad alignment in 2013, but significant differences emerge
More positively, knowledge users and providers do agree about the future direction of the profession. As the table below shows, there is clear alignment in the service aspects that both groups feel are important.

What are the most important aspects of the service?
Communication, understanding and providing decision-ready information



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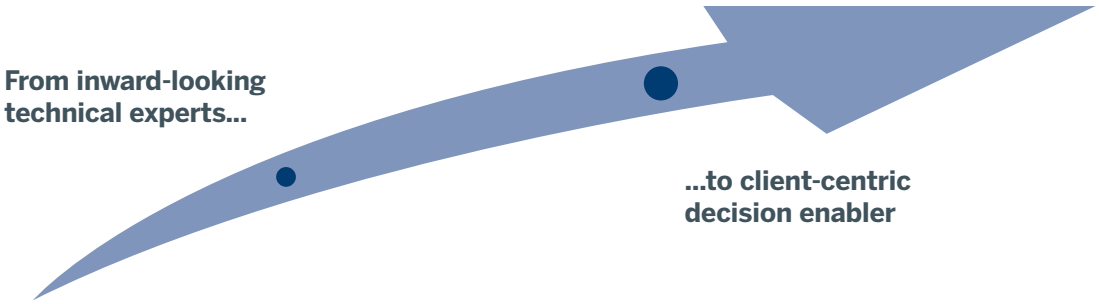
There are, however, some key differences. Providers believe they need a relationship mindset, but users do not think this is essential. In a similar way, users want providers to be more 'strategic' but providers have not rated this as important. This reflects what we have seen above in the differences between the challenges faced by the two groups. Knowledge providers know that, if they had better relationships with their users, they could provide a more effective service, so a relationship mindset is therefore something important. Executives know that, to win deals, close pitches and keep clients satisfied, they need a strategy – not a dissertation – so if information professionals thought more strategically it would help them do their job. Over the rest of this report, we revisit this disparity several times, as part of outlining five key ways in which information professionals can turn the contrast into cohesion, and challenge into opportunity.

Chapter 4

The five essential attributes of the modern information professional.

The core attributes that follow have been identified across best practice performers in the profession, and as such are instrumental to the information professional's growth from a more inward-looking technical expert of the past to a more client-centric, decision enabler.



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#1 – Communicate your value

"Network! Don't just sit in a library waiting for requests to come to you. You should actively seek out opportunities to make a contribution to projects and initiatives, and constantly be listening for leads."

Knowledge provider

Two of the top five challenges that knowledge providers report in this survey are a difficulty in demonstrating the value of information services to the business, and a lack of understanding about the information function. Both of these challenges can be addressed through stronger communication but information professionals are not known for being skilled in this area.

As many as 61% of executives say that "good internal communication" is "very important" yet only 15% rate the capabilities of knowledge providers as "outstanding."

Provide a dialogue, not a transaction
Good communication is not just about being clear and articulate. While that is the baseline requirement, truly strong communication is more about long-term engagement with information users. Often, for example, information users are unsure of what question to ask until they have seen the first part of the answer. "You're often refining your preliminary understanding of the problem and of the solution as you're going along," says Clint Evans, director of brand and talent at RPC, a UK legal services business. This means that information professionals need to view requests from their colleagues as the start of a dialogue, not a transaction request that will be completed in a single pass.

Good communication is also about understanding the mindset of your user. This requires information professionals to align with the timing, delivery methods and language of their stakeholders. "Use language that resonates with whoever you are talking to," says Kate Arnold, President-Elect of SLA. "What we understand and how we speak to one another is not necessarily how you would communicate your value to others in the organisation."

Walking the floors
Information professionals also need to become more integrated into the business. If many departments do not understand what information services do (or could do) it is not their fault. Information professionals need to take responsibility for communicating with the wider organisation. They should be networking, staying on the pulse of the business and seeking out new opportunities to make a contribution. Information managers at PwC, a major accountancy firm, literally walk the floor of the business in an effort to get to know their stakeholders.

There are other methods too, of course. At Catalyst, Ms Combopiano's team are "big on communication" and have initiated a daily intranet news service for all staff. "Partly we do it so people can keep on top of the big news and research studies that are being published. But it's also a way for people to be able to connect with each other about something, which is important when working in a virtual environment."

To communicate value is to demonstrate value
Demonstrating the value of information services is one of the most critical communication challenges. Sometimes, the answer is to make the value of the information professional more quantifiable and linked to the activity of the business. In some contexts, the quantifiable value of information management is linked to winning new business – through successful deals and pitches supported by information professionals. In other contexts, strong information reduces risk. "The extent to which information services and libraries contribute to business decision-making and mitigate risk should be key benchmarks," says an information professional at a large financial institution.

Linking to profit increases and risk mitigation can be important but, in many instances, even the most proactive and talented information professionals can see their value go unnoticed. To truly demonstrate value, information professionals need to get close to the business and forge strong relationships with users, effectively creating a continuous forum of communication. As PwC Canada's Mr Lee puts it: "You need to be part of a team that wins work. There are a lot of other models out there that keep track of statistics. But for me the thing that demonstrates my true value is the closeness of relationships I have within the business – the value that is provided is directly related to the degrees of separation between the information provided and the end product."

Top actionable methods to communicate your value:

1. Network – walk the corridors, attend other team meetings / away days, and attend socials.
2. Map out all the teams in your organisation and identify those you can help (and those you can't).
3. Show how your skills add value – support with testimonials and demonstrations of ROI.
4. Be proactive with ideas.

Case Study: KPMG
Building relationships and "getting close to the action"
Daniel Lee recently joined PwC Canada as a Senior Manager for Knowledge Management Operations but, until recently, he was a knowledge manager for KMPG's global healthcare practice. At KPMG, he started a knowledge management programme "essentially from scratch." His area comprises more than just research, to include, in his words: "a lot of internal networking, a lot of internal social media, a lot of content management, portal management, etc." Like many of his contemporaries, he finds his work has moved beyond the traditional information centre, which might only be involved in research, collation and data analysis.

A big part of Mr Lee's ability to deliver value to his information users stems from his understanding and relationships. "I worked hand-in-hand with a small team of professional services people for about eight years, doing research and really providing value on a day-to-day basis. We were all in the same office and I had a good relationship with them. Relationships like those are a big piece of the value equation. I think the more degrees of separation you have from the end result, the less opportunity you have to provide value. So for me, my strategy has always been to get as close to the action as possible."

So how does Mr Lee go about getting closer to the action? "A lot of it has to do with my personality, because I actively seek out relationships with people. I understand the value of relationships and I also understand that you don't need to have constant contact with people, you just have to have at least one good experience, and then get in touch with them at different times during the year just to reinforce a relationship."

#2 – Understand the drivers

"We pride ourselves on knowing our clients. What are their information needs, what are their favourite resources, what information do they need to pass to their clients, how do they like their information delivered? We pride ourselves in taking all these factors into consideration in design and content delivery."

Knowledge provider

When you shop at Amazon, listen to music on Spotify, or watch a film on Netflix, their systems learn your preferences. These services use that information to customise their offering, so the more you use their services, the more they become tailored to your preferences. In this section we look at how information professionals can do something similar within their own organisations.

How could information / knowledge managers provide more value to your organisation?	
Knowledge providers – Top 5 cited value added services	
Understanding the business/ having better understanding of business	15%
Improve efficiency of processes/ working effectively	14%
Encourage better understanding/ perception/ awareness of what we do/ how we can help them	13%
Embedding/ integration into the organisation	13%
Encourage inter-departmental collaboration/ working together across teams/ dept.	11%
Executives – Top 5 cited value added services	
Provide better quality / good information	22%
Understanding the business/ having better understanding of business	19%
Improve speed/ time saving/ being time efficient	15%
Relevancy/ finding relevant information	15%
Be proactive	11%

Understand the business
Understanding the business is an important priority for both providers and users of information. Sometimes the only way to do this is to have a background in another part of the business (see box *A new breed*). RPC's Mr Evans explains that, in the legal sector, "it's hard to be a successful knowledge professional unless you've done some fee earning work. It's difficult to get, not only an understanding of what the business is all about, but also the psyche of the clients and the psyche of the professionals."

Information professionals should have a deep understanding of why a certain individual wants information, be aware of why it is needed, and know how to best capture and deliver it. By doing this, information professionals move from simply passing on data to providing insights that can immediately drive actions.

Become embedded
Beyond understanding the business, information professionals are increasingly involving themselves directly within core teams. " The classic view of a knowledge manager is that they have insufficient knowledge on issues concerning clients and they are therefore not in the ball game," explains Keith Tracey, managing director at Aon Risk Solutions. "There are efforts to change that."

Becoming more embedded does require buy-in from all sides – management, information leaders and the executives who need to welcome information specialists into their processes. It also requires a different way of thinking. Effectively embedded information professionals do not think 'in transactions' like their librarian predecessors. "It's more about opportunities for adding value on the life cycle," says Mr Lee. "In our business, that would be a professional services engagement. So there's a lot of value we can deliver before that engagement even goes to proposal stage. If the work is won, there's a lot of intelligence that can be provided, then during the engagement and at the end of the engagement there are a lot of points we can provide value. That really goes back to this notion of getting yourself embedded in the process of the business."

Top tips to understand the drivers:
1. Understand your organisation's overall strategy and how your department can contribute.
2. Clarify the objectives and why information is required on each assignment.
3. Capture user preferences – resources and how information is delivered.

A new breed

While the role of the information professional is changing, so too are the kinds of people involved in the profession and the way in which they are incorporated into organisations.

No longer for the shy
"There is a bit of a history of people joining the profession because they thought that they'd never have to deal with people, but it is no longer that profession," explains Daniel Lee, senior manager for PwC Canada's knowledge management operations. An information professional from a large financial institution puts it another way: "The people we recruit now tend to be more business oriented; much more focused on the client, able to present to those at senior levels and demonstrate the expertise and capabilities that we have."

Indeed, this study backs this up with attributes like the ability to build relationships, communicate and integrate into the business, all of which are high on the priority list of both information providers and users.

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Hybrids and translators
Information professionals are also coming from more diverse backgrounds than ever before. One information professional from a large financial institution who we interviewed was an investment banker before transferring to knowledge management. She says that this gives her a better ability to meet the needs of the bankers and act as a translator between them and other information providers in the business: "Once you've done a job, you understand more of the nuances," she explains. "Some concepts you can never get from just being told what they do."

It is similar in the legal profession, where Clint Evans, director of brand and talent at legal services firm RPC, claims that "the more hybrids you can have who understand both worlds, the better we can perform as a function." Both worlds can mean the legal and the information area, but Mr Evans also highlights another hybrid that he calls "business-literate technology experts" who are able talk the language of three areas: fee-earners, knowledge providers and technology specialists. "RPC have certain people who play a key role in the translation of business requirements into a form that IT will understand," he explains. "The translator lubricates conversations and is the most valuable person in the room when it comes to explaining how they create and manage the company website, blogs, Twitter, other social media and extranets. He'll be the person with the most 360-degree view of how it all comes together."

The decentralisation of knowledge providers
As information management welcomes new backgrounds, hybrids and translators, there is also an increasing trend towards decentralised knowledge functions. Knowledge professionals are increasingly being integrated into the teams that use their information. This is a world away from the siloed library-like departments of the past. "The operating model of an information centre is on the way out, especially in the corporate world," explains Mr Lee. "I don't know that many companies are putting out RFP's to develop new information centres. I'd be shocked to see one in fact."

We have found evidence for this trend in our survey too, where 45% said there were knowledge or information providers embedded within various departments across the organisation. Law firms are changing slower than the rest in this area but still report a significant number (36%) of disparately situated information professionals.

Proportion reporting information providers embedded within various departments	
Legal	36%
Education / academia	50%
Scientific / technical services / engineering	49%
Financial services (including accountancy and insurance)	51%
Government / politics	53%
Overall	**45%**

#3 – Manage the process

"Project management skills are so important given the workloads people cope with these days."

Knowledge provider

Today's information professionals need to do more work, deliver it faster and get by on leaner budgets and smaller teams. They also exist in new contexts, where professionals manage a mix of internally captured data, internally researched data and external information services. Many also manage external professionals who contribute to the team under an outsourcing arrangement. The only way to manage the complexity and the workload is to make greater use of project management techniques and technology to achieve greater productivity.

Process management is not something information providers currently do well. In our survey, only 13% of executives rated the performance of knowledge professionals on process management as "outstanding." So, what are some of the things information professionals can do to improve this part of their skill-set? The obvious actions might be to participate in training on relevant technology and project management training. Another could be to make better use of checklists and templates while ensuring that clients understand timeframes and processes.

In the longer term however, information mangers should be looking for deeper transformations: initiatives that reduce the burden of stretched resources, instead of simply providing coping mechanisms. Three of the transformations with the most potential are:

1. Access points and self-service
Particularly in environments with high volumes of information requests, knowledge providers should move towards a self-service model. "The challenge is to create an access point, a technology platform, or some sort of enabler for people to get on and do it themselves," explains Aon Risk Solutions' Mr Tracey. These systems are managed by information professionals but all other parts of the business use them directly. It sounds appealing but is hard to implement. Some parts of the business will claim not to have enough time to do self-service, while others will claim it is too complicated or requires too much training. Getting an access point solution to work therefore depends crucially on management backing. "One of the other challenges is that people build these systems with all these bells and whistles," says an information professional at a large financial institution. "But you need management to be pushing its adoption otherwise nobody will use it."

2. Collation of existing data
The next point comes down to one of the oldest skills of the information manager: collation. Organising data involves bringing it together in ways that make it usable. "In our business, there is tons of information sitting there and often clients say 'you must know a lot about this' – well we do, but no one's pulled it together," explains Mr Tracey. Pulling information together can take a lot of time, especially when different systems are poorly integrated. Once the work is done, however, the collated information can be used to help information professionals deliver insights faster than ever before. Sales and marketing professionals in asset management companies, for example, often need data on investor types and the level of investment in each of their funds. This data is held by fund administration departments – many of which are outsourced – and so while the data is in some sense 'in the business' it has not been harnessed such that it becomes useful where needed. Better collation systems from information professionals can address this.

3. Beware of the black hole
Knowledge providers need to improve the way in which they measure the effectiveness of their service. A crude metric is simply whether users come back for more assistance in future, but what is really needed is a constant feedback loop that enables information providers to streamline their offering. "We don't want our work to go into a black hole," says Catalyst's Ms Combopiano. "We ask people what they need the information for, and then follow up to ask if they got what they wanted. Was it well presented? Did they use it and was it successful?" This kind of feedback has a double benefit. The user gets to tailor future submissions to only include the most relevant information, while the knowledge provider gets to scale down the task involved by stripping out anything that is not being used.

Top tips for managing the process:
1. Participate in project management training.
2. Create project checklists and top tips.
3. Prepare high quality templates.
4. Clarify and manage expectation – timeframe, quality, volume etc.
5. Use technology to speed process – tablets, mobile devices.
6. Encourage self service.

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#4 – Keep up on technical skills

"Keeping up with changes in technology is incredibly important and because this field changes so rapidly, maintaining a current skill set in this area can be challenging. However those who can do this are able to provide a valuable skill set to their company."

Knowledge provider

In this survey, only 14% of executives we spoke to rated the performance on "technical skills" of knowledge providers as "outstanding." There are likely to be many reasons for this poor perception. Part of it might be the bewildering expansion of technologies used in the creation, monitoring, management and dissemination of information. As an information professional from a large financial institution points out, "one of the challenges with new enterprise technology is that it requires a lot of training because there is so much data." There is also a lot of development work being done around big data solutions and cloud-based services, which makes it difficult for organisations to keep pace. "The internet has probably leapt ahead of knowledge management," says Aon Risk Solutions' Mr Tracey. "I don't think companies have really caught up with the tools that are out there."

It could also be the case that, with so much emphasis now on attributes like communication and understanding, information professionals might neglect their technical skills. Some have never had these technical skills in the first place, since they have a background from outside of information management. PwC Canada's Mr Lee says: "When new people come into the information profession, sometimes they don't know the first thing about a lot of these things. They play around in the sandbox thinking that they are doing information work but they don't know how to organise a database, and they don't know how to manage a website."

Technical skills are still as important

In an era when database management seems secondary to relationship management, information professionals should take heart from the fact their core day to day skills have not changed. What is different are the tools involved: "The environment has changed in terms of what you're organising," says Mr Lee. "I organise pieces of electronic content now, I don't organise a shelf of books. It's the same thing – it's just I'm applying it to a different area."

Like Mr Lee, many information professionals have embraced their ubiquitous digital environment. The best are experts in – and early adopters of – new technology solutions and tools. They establish themselves as centres of excellence within the business, available to help executives and other departments get the most out of new and existing systems. Many information professionals are already masters of technology and use their expertise not only to demonstrate their value to the organisation, but also to influence key technology investment decisions. Any knowledge management function that falls behind the technological times risks losing control of these key decisions.

Translate technical knowledge into value
"It enhances your reputation if people think that you understand technology," says Ms Combopiano, whose team were the first in the business to become advanced users of social media data. "Now people will come to us to ask our opinion about something related to it." Being at the cutting edge has helped her team prove their value to the business.

Presentation skills are a more straightforward way for information professionals to communicate the value of their services. "The way in which you present something to make it absorbable and meaningful is definitely of value," says Mr Tracey. One clear and insightful infographic can often be more powerful – for the reputation of an information centre/professional – than a 100-page written report. It shows that some analysis has been done, that an insight has been created and that the information professional – through taking the time to create a clear and immediate depiction – understands the value of the information user's time.

Top tips to apply your technical skills:
1. Maintain the high quality and robustness of information.
2. Ensure that information is delivered in a timely manner.
3. Keep up with latest sources. Don't let your clients get ahead of you.
4. Integrate technology with the information you provide – update internal databases, greater use of mobile technology, and so on.

Case Study: Catalyst
Driving quality and knowing "the business of the business"
Jan Combopiano is Vice President & Chief Knowledge Officer at Catalyst, a research organisation based on Wall Street in New York. She wears three hats. One is that of the head of the information centre which, with a staff of seven, produces secondary research products and reference materials. Her second hat is as the operations leader for a research team, which helps Catalyst's research move from conceptualisation to dissemination. Finally, she has responsibility for knowledge management and the content across the organisation, supporting the events team, the membership team and social media teams.

Ms Combopiano has played a key role in pushing the envelope in terms of the quality of information her teams provide. "One person on my team is a fact checker, that's her full time job," she explains, "we do fact checking for everything." The reason why they have this role is that she understands how much it hurts the reputation of the organisation to put something out that's not right. While it has been difficult to get to a stage where time for fact checking could be built into all the relevant processes in the company, it is now a source of deep value to the organisation.

This highlights the continuing importance, and the value-adding potential, of the fundamental technical skills of information professionals. However, she believes information professionals seeking to add more value to their organisation should follow one piece of advice: "know the business of the business." For Ms Combopiano this means making sure that "whatever you're providing is helping someone actually do whatever the business does and is not extraneous."

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#5 – Provide decision-ready information

"Demonstrate effective filtering, organisation and communication of information. People don't have time to read, think and write much, so they will appreciate someone who has a good feeling for what they want and need and can give it to them effectively."

Knowledge provider

The top three information related challenges for executives concern the "relevancy of information," "having to sift through information" and "information overload." The common thread through all of these is that the information they receive is not 'decision ready'. In other words, executives have to spend valuable time trying to get the cup they need from the flood provided. Information providers need to understand that a big part of the value they provide is in turning the deluge of data into succinct, high-quality, current, on-message information.

"Stop providing the world to people," says Catalyst's Ms Combopiano, "provide them a path instead. You can't cover every base. Use your judgement and point them in the right direction." According to her, many information professionals try to show their value by being as exhaustive and comprehensive as possible. "If it's unclear they're going to give them the lot to make sure they're covering every possibility. I don't think people realise that's undermining their case."

One information professional from a large financial institution tries to understand information users' needs as a way of filtering the useful data from the torrent of information. "Very few people need to go deeper into the data so it doesn't need to be obvious to everyone that there's so much information," she says. "We try to figure out what is most needed so that we don't provide the full pie, just the 25% that matters the most."

Look to influence decisions

Only 8% of executives rate the performance of knowledge providers at providing decision-ready information as "outstanding" – one of the very lowest scores that came through the survey in this category. This does not surprise one information professional who we interviewed for this research. She argues that "it is actually the hardest thing to do properly" for information providers.

While it is challenging, the first step is to avoid the old habit of quarantining knowledge management as a function that passively provides information. "The view is often that it is somebody else's big decision. But information professionals should recognise that they can influence that decision. If you don't go into it thinking that, you will never provide decision-ready information," explains Ms Combopiano.

Do not be afraid to apply your own view
Information providers have traditionally kept themselves out of decisions. In some cases, this is just quicker and easier. It is simpler to forward 200 pages of data than to read, interpret and summarise it. In other cases, a lack of confidence is at play. Information professionals may feel intimidated by their senior executive colleagues, feel they do not understand the client side of the equation or just not want to risk being wrong about something. Some would simply argue that it is not their role to comment on information they provide.

Historically there was no problem with that view, but information providers increasingly need to offer more to demonstrate their value. This means presenting information in a way that provides an additional layer of caveats and implications. By understanding the needs of business users better, information professionals can provide context-specific information and ensure that users do not waste time on content that is not relevant.

Executives like bite-size chunks and visuals
Executives never have enough time. Information professionals –who should be the solution to information overload – should recognise this and try to save executives time wherever possible. Much of this comes down to structure, as one knowledge provider explains: "My boss once said to me, 'take your concluding sentence, and move it to the top' – for anybody in the C-suite, that is what they want to know. You can then supply the evidence below but they want those first two bullets, that first paragraph."

Executives also like information presented in a visually intuitive way – using charts, infographics and tables – rather than pages of text. Creating these is sometimes a challenge for information centres, but this creates an excellent opportunity for successful collaboration with other departments within your organisation. One knowledge provider describes an example of doing exactly this: "On a competitive intelligence project we partnered with Marketing and Document Design to produce graphs and charts that showed our position in a specific practice area and geographic region."

Top tips to provide decision-ready information:
1. Iterate the process of providing information – check and confirm early on, evolve etc.
2. Link information to overall objectives.
3. Structure the information logically, e.g. pyramid principal or MECE.[5]
4. Brevity as opposed to data dumps.
5. Use visuals, infographics and word clouds.

[5] There are many standards in place for structuring data and information professionals should follow the method most appropriate to the task at hand. The Pyramid Principle, for example, refers to putting the main recommendation/answer on top, or first. This is then supported by sub-level recommendations, which in turn are supported by more granular facts or data. In essence, the ideas at any level of the pyramid are always summaries of the ideas below them. Our other example, the MECE principle, stands for 'mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive' – it is an organising principle that guides the sorting of a set of information into subsets. The subsets should be mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. Both these principles and many others are useful in information and decision mapping processes.

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Case Study: Major global investment bank
Being proactive and providing decision ready information

The investment banking sector is facing a tough sales environment and scarce resources. For an information professional at one of these institutions (which has requested to remain anonymous for this report), the key is to be proactive and use the institution's two key assets – human capital and financial capital – as efficiently as possible.

In response, the investment bank set about building applications that could measure those assets. One initiative looked at whether the time spent by various teams was correctly aligned to the client base. "We use our CRM to estimate how much time our people are allocating to clients and what percentage revenue they have for us and market share in our industry," says the information professional. "You could see that a client might have done five deals but that they have only used you on the really small ones, for example, and they take up a lot of our time."

"A group head can look at our information across all the different bankers and know that those 20 clients are on a quadrant of time to market share or to revenues where we really haven't made money, even though they are at the high end in terms of where we spend the majority of our time."

Importantly, the investment bank now makes sure that information is always provided in an instantly accessible format. "We do these scatter graphs that just highlight the outliers. It doesn't answer every question but at least it draws your attention to those outliers which most need a response."

Chapter 5

Conclusion.

> *"Market the value of your services more and try to change the image of the "library" from old fashioned to cutting edge."*
>
> **Knowledge provider**

Information management professionals should take comfort in the fact that they face many of the same challenges as other professions. Those in human resources, tax, finance and legal, for instance, are all striving to become less siloed, closer to core business functions and able to show strategic value to the business. In the same way, information professionals need to justify their value and become proactively involved in the most effective way possible.

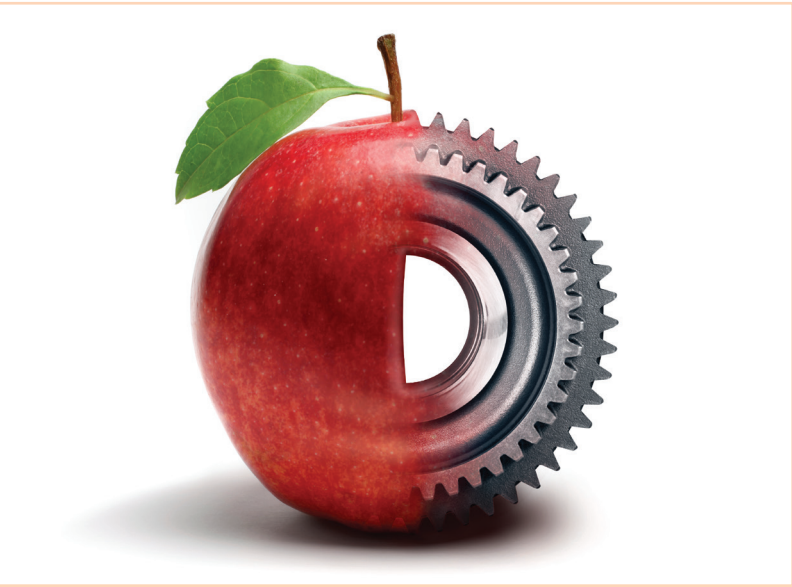
Many of the more specific lessons in this report are linked to simply building trust internally and striving to use best practices. For Catalyst's Ms Combopiano, it boils down to becoming a "crucial associate". "I think that's really important," she says. "For us, we've developed a strong relationship with our CEO and so if she needs something really quickly then we provide it quickly. If she wants to be able to say "X" and there is no support for X, we need to give her a credible alternative so she can say "Y" and still feel like she's saying what she wants. Part of that is being incredibly responsive to what someone else needs, always being there and being able to show value in what you do."

As we progress into a world of endless information and new ways to find it, information providers will solidify themselves as the best solution to their organisation's information needs. But as we have seen in this report, doing so will require adaptation to an environment that is characterised by:

- **Changing landscapes** – a new era of smarter technology, big data and a knowledge economy;
- **A perception gap** – where many knowledge providers currently overestimate the level of value they provide in this new world; and
- **Austerity** – some information functions risk being downsized or even dismantled due to an environment of declining budgets, IT investment and headcount.

This environment demands an urgent response from information professionals that clearly demonstrates their value to organisations. Rather than perceive this as a threat to the profession, dominated by a fear of being replaced by a self-service system or outsourced service; those that emerge ahead of the pack will embrace this change and recognise that, with the right response, these changing forces can become an opportunity to evolve and enhance your role – from gatherer and supplier to analyst, educator and indispensible guide.

This research has identified the five core attributes of best practice performers which you can emulate to excel in your field. To help you make the most of this opportunity and act on this insight, we have developed a check list overleaf of tasks which you can use as a framework to increase the value you deliver to your organisation.



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12 tasks for modern Information Professionals.

1. **Understand the business** – develop a deep understanding of why a certain individual wants information, be aware of how it is used, and try to anticipate business needs.

2. Show how you add value in the way you combine, analyse and deliver information – **deliver decision-ready information, be the solution to information overload**, and don't be afraid to provide your own view.

3. **Actively communicate** with your colleagues across the organisation. Never hide away in a silo, and provide a dialogue, not a transaction.

4. Link your work to **savings and profits** at every opportunity. Make the value of information more quantifiable and clearly linked to the activity of the business.

5. Link your work to **risk mitigation** at every opportunity. In particular, highlight the risks of relying on Google and free information sources.

6. **Proactively create solutions for the business**. Never let yourself sit passively and respond to requests.

7. **Build relationships** with key stakeholders and new stakeholders. Integrate yourself as deeply as possible into the business.

8. **Be a technical mastermind** – learn new useful skills every week, explore new technology and show off your capabilities.

9. **Go to the top** – ensure senior leaders see your value-adding efforts and become your advocates, instructing their teams to use your services (not Google).

10. **Walk the floors** – network, stay on the pulse of the business and seek out new opportunities to make a contribution.

11. **Pursue initiatives that reduce the burden of stretched resources** – build self-service access points, make better use of existing libraries and follow up the usage of your deliverables with an eye to reducing what you provided (saving time on both sides).

12. **Change your mindset** – Look to users as more than your colleagues: they are **your client or customer**, treat them as such by going the extra mile to help them, ensure they 'buy' from you again.

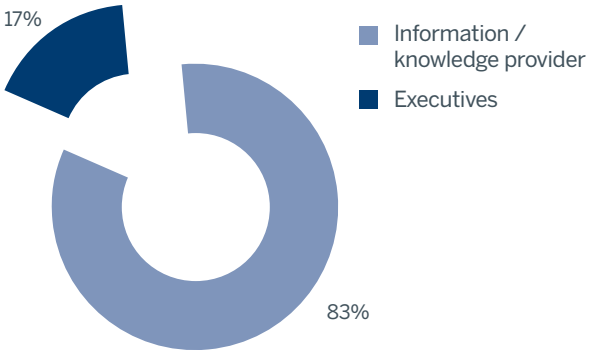
About the research

The Evolving Value of Information Management is a report commissioned by the Financial Times, in conjunction with SLA. The research was carried out by Meridian West and written by Longitude Research.

This research contrasts responses from both full-time information professionals and corporate executives in organisations that have dedicated information departments. Overall we surveyed 882 people, 83% of whom were information professionals.

The fieldwork was carried out in April and May 2013, drawing on both FT and SLA panels. A high proportion of the respondents (71%) hold a current SLA membership. Participants were drawn from a wide range of professions (including public organisations) and while the majority were based in North America the study gathered responses from four continents.

Profile of respondents



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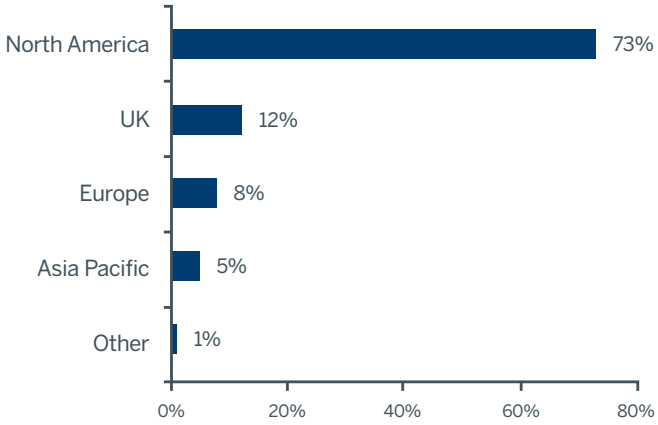

Sector

***Definition of service aspects**

Communication. Good internal communication.

Understanding. Proactively identifies needs of internal stakeholders.

Provides decision-ready information. Pragmatically applies knowledge to the situation to achieve quick and effective commercial solutions.

Technical skills. The advice/solution is right and, where needed, cutting edge.

Strategic. Readily offers insights and advice, which support firm-wide strategy.

Relationship mind-set. Educator rather than a provider. Focuses on developing deeper, trusting relationships, not just the project in hand.

Process management. Manages expectations effectively, including processes and time scales.

Negotiating. Negotiates with third party vendors/providers to save costs for the firm.

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- **Kate Arnold,** SLA President-Elect

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