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BUILDING THE KNOWLEDGE CULTURE

EVOLVING CONNECTIONS:
BETTY MAYFIELD AND "THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD"
BY MARCIE STONE

QUICK TAKES:

Using connections to produce knowledge services to benefit the organization and maximize the use of corporate resources to reach strategic goals….

An insatiable curiosity and a desire to go beyond the boundaries of a stated question to the associated implied requirements….

Relationships have been key throughout my career….

Connecting can be seen as a lot of things – selling library services, proactively providing answers to questions, continually asking your colleagues what they are working on, connecting yourself with content so that you can gain some understanding of the areas of knowledge your peers are working in. It is incredibly rewarding to learn something new every day.

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From 1991, to her retirement in 2010, Betty Mayfield had the best job in the world. Just ask her!

For those 20 years Betty served as Director, Library and Media Services, at Vulcan Inc., the umbrella corporation for the many enterprises of the Paul G. Allen family, where she was responsible for managing all aspects of the personal and corporate book, archival and media collections. Allen, one of the co-founders of Microsoft, retired from Microsoft in 1983 and founded Vulcan in 1986.

As you can imagine, supporting the information needs of such a multifaceted enterprise is an exciting, and exacting, task. Vulcan Inc.'s library collections include personal archives, oral histories, artifacts, and book and print materials as well as a significant audio and video collection. Digital access and preservation of the media collection and the design of library software, along with traditional online catalog access to the collection, are among the main responsibilities of the Vulcan Library group. However, no matter how rarified the job at Vulcan may have been, Betty maintains that her traditional library skills and variety of experiences as a solo and academic librarian and library consultant enabled her to build a strong and effective team to meet the highly diversified information needs of the Vulcan organization.

Vulcan provides the corporate organization and staff to oversee and support the Allen family's philanthropic efforts and business interests. As noted at the Vulcan web site (www.vulcan.com), the corporation "creates and advances a variety of world-class endeavors and high impact initiatives…. Those endeavors include the creation of innovative technologies, award-winning films and vibrant new neighborhoods. They're about the

revolution of rock 'n roll, the humanity of science fiction, and the poetry of a fingertip catch. They're about reaching from the tiniest genome to the very stratosphere, and most importantly, about improving the way people live, learn, do business, and experience the world."

Prior to joining Vulcan, Betty worked as a one-person librarian for several companies, as a community college staff librarian and, subsequently and primarily, as a library consultant for corporate libraries in Canada, Australia and the United States. She holds a B.A. in history from the University of Calgary and an M.L.S. from the University of British Columbia. The story of how Betty traveled from the world of solo librarianship to that of consultant, and then on to one of the most challenging and fascinating jobs that anyone could wish for, is a tale of connections. Not the "who-you-know" kind of connection, but connections that enable librarians to bring together ideas, experiences, skills, people, and information to produce knowledge services to benefit the organization and enable it to maximize the use of corporate resources to reach strategic goals.

Betty's career arc – encompassing such diverse experiences – enables those of us who hear about it to see the evolution of information services in several contexts, and all from the consistent perspective of one individual. It's a perspective solidly grounded in traditional fundamentals: selection, collection development, cataloging, database design, the reference interview, and, most significantly, client relations founded on understanding the organization's business model, strategic goals, and internal relationships – everything that contributes to building both the collection and the services that are relevant to the specific needs of an individual or a company of any size.

And there's one more quality which has played a large role in the information services that Betty has developed: an insatiable curiosity and desire to go beyond the boundaries of a stated question to the associated implied requirements. This approach provides significant benefits for the information provider, for with it the information professional becomes skilled in acquiring significant corporate knowledge. It is no small matter, this way of working. Indeed, it is a key component of client trust and, as such, fundamental to facilitating strategic learning within the organization. As Betty remarked, "without curiosity the answer to a question may be much more one-dimensional – not so good in our 3-D world!"

Betty's earliest work as a solo librarian and as a consultant was with engineers, accountants, geologists and lawyers. She was generally brought on board because someone in the firm realized that they needed both a library and a professional librarian, not a secretary performing additional duties. Although she didn't start out with the goal of becoming a consultant, Betty soon found herself in that position after several moves left her resumé looking like that of someone who just couldn't hold a job. As a result, she abandoned the chronological resumé and rearranged her experience by the type of work she had performed, leading to consulting assignments with companies that needed to establish and grow their information services.

Betty found that preparing a preliminary organization of a client company's existing resources was the best first step when she began a consulting job. Since organizing and cataloging even small collections takes time, she was able to use that initial period to embark on an "information literacy" program for the organization, beginning with their own internal collection and moving out to identifying and exploring additional requirements. In doing so, she was able to meet her own need to learn about the organization's information requirements while simultaneously laying the foundation for the corporate knowledge culture.

Betty used these first phases of the assignment to demonstrate to the client how information services could be developed and employed to help the company achieve its goals much more effectively than by simply ensuring that the library collection was well organized. Typically, she also found that discovering the clients' enthusiasm for their own work sparked her to learn more about it and, also, that spending time with her users in their offices or in small groups gave her greater insight into their work than those times that they came to her with a specific request. One of her most interesting observations, and one that really provides a key to her success in establishing a knowledge culture, was her remark that when e-mail became the norm, the opportunity for face-to-face conversation became even more important.

I asked Betty what became of her work to develop a client's information services when her consulting contract was over – and her answer, which speaks again to connections, is a lesson to anyone trying to position information services at the core of an organization. "I often found someone in the organization who

understood libraries and information services," she said. "So I made it my business to partner with that person to develop library services. If I did it alone, the library would be closed the minute my contract ended."

In responding to my question about how she adjusted her view of information services as she moved from company to company, Betty replied from the perspective of 30 years in the profession and in doing so clearly identified the important factors that result in success in so many different environments:

"Adjustment in the information world over the past 30 years would have been monumental regardless of how many organizations I worked for. I think the most important factor here is technology. When I began working in special libraries I created a newsletter typed on business letterhead. If I wanted an image on the page, I cut the image out and taped it on to the page, then photocopied the page for that smashing corporate look!! I would walk to the public library to look up things in the paper copy of *Facts-on-File* or an almanac or index. When faxes and online services like DIALOG were introduced into the corporate world, I saved the soles of my shoes. The Internet then became my friend and I remember sitting once with a very excited user who said 'Look at this, Betty, if you just add a word, it narrows your search and you get all this amazing information.' Online Public Access Catalogs (OPACs) allowed a solo librarian to have a library catalog as sophisticated as academic libraries. Information resources in my world began to be called 'content' and users demanded media rich answers to questions; they wanted to watch a video or listen to a podcast rather than read about something in their subject area. 'Acquisition' became 'ingest' and 'indexing' became 'taxonomy.' The change has been astonishing and the days of my tweaking code in library software programs were connected with becoming very good friends with software engineers. It is simply a different informational world."

Betty and I returned frequently to the theme of connections during our talks and I asked her to delineate some of the various types of connections that were primary factors in successfully managing knowledge development and knowledge sharing (KD/KS) and building a knowledge culture.

"Relationships have been key throughout my career, and the opportunities I have had to work with an amazing range of professionals have been one of the great loves of the job. As a young librarian working in a solo world, the only contact I had with my own library peers was through library organizations, reading professional literature, and attending workshops and conferences. Outside the profession, though, the peer contact I did have was fascinating and diverse. I worked with accountants, engineers, lawyers, and managers from all over the world. I also connected and learned from executive assistants, support staff and office managers. I can't tell you how much I learned from those who ran offices, planned meetings, and wrote office communications. And all this was in the days before e-mail, the Internet, or even fax machines.

"As I grew in experience I realized that one of the gifts of being a librarian was to be able to connect resources with users. Quite often this meant bringing people together, bringing an accountant together with a manager, for example, when they both worked for the same client. Or bringing software developers together with users, to help design better user tools. Bringing scientists together with information professionals to ensure that the end user and the content provider understood what each other needed to be successful. I remember one meeting where I introduced some neuroscientists from the Allen Institute of Brain Science to library leaders at the University of Washington. I began to wonder, once the conversation began to flow, if I would be able to follow it at all, but the connection was what was important.

"Change also brings connection. When I began to work at Vulcan my task was to catalog a personal collection of books. I saw a change when I began to … answer reference questions, connecting users with information. I saw another change when a software engineer asked me if I knew anyone who could help provide metadata to a media database (yes, I said, that would be me!! – and I could also help you design the database so the fields of information gave the best access to the collection). At Vulcan, connections were made when projects began internally as ideas and then grew to be fully deployed, independent projects, and then finally to external organizations. In that diverse environment I worked hard at maintaining connections with people who were key to projects, to watch how they grew and be prepared to support them when they had information questions or needed advice on who might be able to help them problem solve."

One of the most powerful connections that can be made comes from the realization that people, processes and information external to the information organization frequently provide the most effective means for positioning knowledge services as strategic for the corporation. If these connections aren't made and nurtured, there is a high risk that the information/knowledge services staff will be operating in a vacuum and will not become corporate thought and change leaders. Nor will they be able to create a strategic learning environment or strengthen the corporate information/knowledge culture.

As the company's web site proclaims, Vulcan is a "progressive, innovative, entrepreneurial organization powered by individuals with exceptional talents and skills who are all aligned through a common aspiration – to change the world by adding value to and improving the quality of people's lives." The majority of the information staff's time generally is spent working with their secondary customers the managers and staff who are responsible for the day-to-day execution of Vulcan's operations.

The staff that Betty led at Vulcan is known as the "library group" – there is no actual corporate library – and consists of the Director (Betty's position), an administrative assistant, an archivist, an image librarian, a systems administrator (also a librarian), catalogers, and two broadcast technicians, who were the digitization specialists. Betty's experience as a solo librarian and consultant was instrumental in developing the functional processes and operating style of the library group. She set an example by forging her own strong ties with various Vulcan corporate elements, and emphasized the paramount necessity of connecting with internal clients and getting to know their project details and goals. This interconnectivity created strategic connections to other parts of Vulcan and to external resources as a routine part of information services, and has assured that required information is provided in the optimal format. As a result, the library group and the knowledge services staff have become strategic partners to many of the operational elements of the corporation, increasing their visibility and value to the organization.

Another important element of success results when work-as-fun is part of a corporate environment, creating a contagious enthusiasm and fostering the kinds of connections that produce significant strategic learning and the development of a sophisticated knowledge culture. The knowledge services staff is then in a key position to communicate this enthusiasm, all while connecting information seekers with information sources of all types. Adding to the enthusiasm and increasing the enjoyment is the abundant mutual appreciation and respect for the skills and knowledge possessed by all of the highly specialized staff, a perspective about knowledge work that runs throughout the corporation. In particular, Vulcan's leadership values the skills and potential of the knowledge staff, and provides financial and personnel resources to facilitate their success. (In this context, it's interesting to note that Paul and Jody Allen's father was Associate Director of the University of Washington libraries from 1960 to 1982– hence the Allen Library on the UW campus, funded by the Allen family and named in his honor.)

Betty's experience at Vulcan definitely reinforced her belief that fundamental librarian skills are the basis for success at any level. I found it most interesting that she emphasized the role of collection development in creating successful KD/KS and information services.

> "What I found, when I looked at how we worked with collection development (compared to how others did it) was that there was a solid structure in our collection development policies. We thought a lot about what content was available, how it worked with what we already had access to, and how we could best determine the value of it. In today's world of information there are a lot of haystacks out there and we often need to find the needle. With smart collection development we were able to answer users' needs by providing the best content possible to their desktops. Success can sometimes be measured by the shortness of the reference question – 'Do we have anything on XXX?' 'Yes, there are 3 very good documentaries about what you are seeking and they are ready for you online.'"

In addition to reference and collection development, cataloging and database building also take on a new dimension in managing information for an enterprise as diverse as Vulcan. Not only do the corporation's programs cover a wide range of interests, the type of content found in the variety of projects and programs is nearly as varied as its subject matter. In addition to the print, data and enormous image collections that are standard fare for a multi-faceted corporation, there are also vintage military aircraft, rock-and-roll and science fiction memorabilia, historically significant computers, and numerous other unusual content types and artifacts that need to be managed. This is where imagination, creativity and the ability to move outside standard

information containers are crucial to successful knowledge service – and also where it's imperative to be familiar enough with the client's requirements to take the initiative and provide information before it's requested. As Betty remarked, "Connecting can be seen as a lot of things – selling library services, proactively providing answers to questions, continually asking your colleagues what they are working on, connecting yourself with content so that you can gain some understanding of the areas of knowledge your peers are working in. It is incredibly rewarding to learn something new every day."

So here we are – collection development, cataloging and database building, reference skills, curiosity and knowing the client – all information services basics. And they can all be connected to produce multifaceted and successful knowledge services that create wide-spread strategic learning and a pervasive knowledge culture for a diverse, complex and sophisticated work force without a "corporate library." It's a matter of evolving the skills that emerged as our profession developed and coupling them with appropriate connections, to create knowledge services that support the strategic goals and mission of the parent corporation in a new paradigm of interaction. Perhaps we can just call it "a knowledge services state of mind."

And as for learning something new every day?

Let Betty tell it.

In a speech to the University of Washington Information School's 2006 Convocation, Betty provided an example of a day in her job. "…I found myself glued to my laptop as I watched a live feed streamed from a camera aboard Space Ship One on its race into the black sky. That afternoon, I worked with our technical team streaming live HD video from an underwater camera at the bottom of the ocean…That was some day!"

And, I would add, some career!

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