



Annual Conference on World-Wide Web Applications: Preparing for the New Millennium

The Centre for Research in World-Wide Web Applications of the Department of Information Studies at the Rand Afrikaans University, South Africa will host this conference on 9 and 10 September 1999.

For full information, please visit the conference site at <http://www.rau.ac.za/conf/www1999>.

Inaugural speech on Knowledge Management

Prof Adeline du Toit (asadt@lw.rau.ac.za) delivered her inaugural speech recently. She is a professor in Information Management in the Department of Information Studies, Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg. The following is a summary of her speech:

Knowledge management: An indispensable component of the strategic plan of South African universities

Throughout the world the value of knowledge is increasingly being recognised and although enterprises are attempting to explicitly manage this important asset, it is obvious that educational institutions are the last ones to apply knowledge management.

Universities in South Africa are presently undergoing a process of transformation. One aspect of this transformation concerns the adoption of the outcomes-based approach for designing programmes and qualifications. Key learning outcomes for a degree include:

- Dissemination of advanced knowledge
- Critical analytical thinking and reasoning skills
- Implementation of advanced knowledge in the community.

It is therefore crucial that academics at a university are inspired to transfer and share knowledge in order to influence improvement, change and innovation throughout the community. To be successful in the management of knowledge as an asset, it is of fundamental importance to recognise that knowledge assets, just as any other asset of the university, should be managed in the context of the overall university. The focus should therefore not be on knowledge per se, but rather on managing the university to include a knowledge perspective. This is achieved by recognising that knowledge is a valuable asset that should be managed explicitly in a university.

Knowledge management's overall purpose is to maximise the university's knowledge-related effectiveness and renew knowledge constantly to secure sustained viability and profitability. It is critical to have a culture of knowledge sharing. In such a culture, free-flowing conversation, open dialogue across organisational boundaries, team and network building are important mechanisms for creating high levels of innovation and learning. The management of knowledge should not be done on an ad hoc or isolated manner. It should be integrated into the other management activities in the university and linked to the strategic plan. Universities have few tangible assets and their intangible assets are much more valuable than their tangible assets. The objectives of the university should direct all the knowledge management actions of the university. The strategic importance of knowledge assets in a university should be determined.

A knowledge strategy can be seen as a long-term plan aimed at managing knowledge for competitive advantage and involves four steps:

- An analysis of the external environment in which the university operates
- Providing a detailed understanding of those aspects of the university that are of strategic importance
- Formulation of the knowledge strategy
- Implementation and evaluation of the knowledge strategy.

External assessment is important from a knowledge strategy point of view since the knowledge strategy must take cognisance of the competitors' actions and knowledge management strengths and weaknesses. Opportunities present in the external environment that can be exploited using a knowledge management approach should be identified, as well as threats (in terms of knowledge acquisition) present in the strategies of competitors that could affect the competitive position of the university. Ways to counter these threats should be developed.

Self-analysis aims at providing a detail understanding of strategically important knowledge assets and areas of the university. Most employees of universities are highly qualified educated professionals, that is, they are knowledge workers. Academics in universities have specific knowledge that enables them to pursue options that achieve competitive advantages for the university. Strengths are the expertise embedded in the minds of academics and the know-how and experience inherent in the university's memory bank. Core business processes should be designed to support the strategic direction of knowledge management.

The next step is to formulate a knowledge management strategy and to move from knowledge management to knowledge navigation. Programmes need to be established for:

- Plugging knowledge gaps and addressing deficiencies
- Improving knowledge management processes
- Establishing enablers.

Universities who really want to excel in the future should be managed explicitly, systematically and comprehensively from a knowledge perspective.

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