

Gatekeeper as relayer of information:  
implications for training and education of information  
professionals.

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## Introduction

"Gatekeepers" indicate the function of individuals who have extensive outside contacts beyond the boundaries of their organization and usually are acting as sources of information for their colleagues. It was found that usually these people were responsible for introducing the most important technical and business ideas into the organization; therefore they are considered as vital elements in the transmission and generation of ideas.

It is a well-known fact that the lifeblood of business is information and therefore circulating that information to the vital parts of the corporate body is essential to the productivity of an organization.

Modern managers and policy makers are beginning to consider information as a resource of economic value and as the basis of scientific, technological and social development. There is now a growing consensus among information managers that their function is not concerned simply with documents, messages and data, but with the entire apparatus of information handling.

While in the past activities relating to the handling of information products were fragmented and labeled according to traditional notions and professions, today we see the entire cycle of knowledge production, transmission, use and application as a continuum.

A considerable body of research findings on formal and informal communication in science and technology has been accumulated. Investigations on innovation and the creative use of technology have examined what caused certain groups to be successful. The results clearly show that dialog networks, spontaneous information activities and the informal nature of interaction among individuals are some of those resources which successful companies benefit from. By sparking off new ways of looking at a problem or situation - this can lead to unexpectedly valuable solutions. There is a sort of cross-fertilization of information that stimulate the activities of persons and their social and professional lives.

Thus, discussions on efficient information flow in an organization also implies the use of the odd, unexpected skills of people necessary to pass on the useful or relevant information from one group or individual to another, or to enable the appropriate people to get into touch with each other. Through the eyes, ears and minds of its personnel a company can keep in much closer touch with the market place and respond much faster and more flexible to changing situations.

This is an essential ingredient in the recipe for survival in a world which is turning ever faster and becoming increasingly information-rich, but shrinking by the ability to transfer information globally and make use of the information.

Since the concept of modern information management also implies the ambition of tapping the information resource latent in the personnel, the role and function of gatekeepers has been brought into the focus of interest again.

Managers are conscious about the fact that the personal, causal and informal contacts are far more important sources of ideas and innovation processes than the formal communication channels. Therefore they are eager to know:

Who are those individuals who possess this ability to enhance, highlight and amplify the routing of information? What is the origin of these informal communication channels? How do they make it happen? Are there certain organizational conditions for the promotion of gatekeepers? Is it possible to "grow" individuals for this role?

### General characteristics of the gatekeeper role

The role and function of technological gatekeepers was first described in the late 1960's by Professor T.J. Allen and his associates at MIT, who within the framework of an extensive research programme were analysing the flow of information in American R&D engineering laboratories. (Allen 1968)

Their investigations have been followed by a great number of other studies and sociometric analysis, concerning communication patterns among the members of scientific communities, R&D departments, companies, national and international organizations etc.

Thus, "invisible college" "communication star" "gatekeeper" "dialog network" "oldboys network" etc. are well-known phenomena today, indicating consciousness about the importance of lateral communication within organizations.

Although, the role and the function of gatekeepers have been extensively discussed during the last twenty years, there has only been given scant attention to the analysis of the skills, abilities and competencies of these individuals who seem to play such an essential part in the vitalization of information flow.

Before discussing the education and training implications of information gatekeepers, let us consider some typical characteristics of this role:

## **NATURAL**

Although information gatekeepers play a key role in industrial progress by bringing information into the organization through both formal and informal channels, in most companies this is not an officially designated function.

Since a number of people have suggested that the gatekeeper role has close similarities with that of the information broker, it should be pointed out that, unlike the brokers, they provide an informal information service as a **natural extension of their professional activities**. While the brokers are full-time members of the user groups they serve, gatekeepers appear to have acquired their role "naturally".

## **INFORMAL**

The role essentially implies informal, personal communications, using oral or written communication forms. Gatekeepers are performing assistance just in those situations when the formal information channels have not been successful.

Compared with those channels that have been formally established and are formally maintained by professional communities in order to facilitate professional communication among the members of the community, the informal networks, under many circumstances, seem to be more **efficient and convenient** communication form to people than the other formal ones.

The significance of informal communication patterns in science and other fields cannot be overemphasized. At the frontiers of a fast-moving field, a scientist integrated in a communication network of this kind is at a great advantage over his non-integrated colleagues in receiving new information.

## **SPONTANEOUS**

It has been stated that **the gatekeeping role develops spontaneously**, in response to the very real need to surmount certain barriers. These barriers are often created by separate organizational cultures or erected by the organization in its effort to preserve its proprietary interests. (Katz and Kahn, 1966)

The role is typical of **problem solving situations**, characterized by great uncertainty and severe time pressures, where the interpersonal exchange between colleagues has been found to be the most effective mechanism for information transfer.

Generally, these individuals make it their business to inform themselves of new developments of concern to the company, by both **reading** current literature in the field and maintaining **extensive contacts** with other individuals in other organizations.

### How to "grow" gatekeepers

In his communication Professor Allen agreed that it should be possible to "grow" gatekeepers, but we still know little about the psychological, intellectual and behavioural factors affecting the transfer of information and that specific role itself.

Within the range of Allen's research programme a personality test has also been carried out to show whether these sociometrically central positioned "communication stars" have certain specific characteristics, but it did not give any positive results (Allen 1968).

There is no consensus on the professional qualification of a gatekeeper, nor has there been developed any education and training programme for them. The gatekeepers' ability, to locate and communicate professional information effectively through informal channels and direct it to actual problems, must be considered as a "natural talent"; thus, no formal education exists for this purpose.

In a few of advanced study programmes in social, information and communication sciences one might find some units of courses which might be relevant to the education and training of potential gatekeepers, but these fragments are dispersed and difficult to locate.

Since the role develops naturally and spontaneously within organizations and scientific communities, related to tasks and "local" communication conditions, to create an education programme for the fulfilment of this function - it seems to be an unrealistic approach. Thus, instead of presenting a curriculum plan, the following discussion is aimed to give an overview of those qualifications which seem to be essential to this function.

Through the analysis of the gatekeepers' "natural" talent it is possible to acquire a form of **tacit knowledge** which can be used to the improvement of communication skills and activities of information professionals.

Discussing education and training possibilities for the "growing" of gatekeepers in organizations, it should be pointed out that many of the gatekeepers' skills could be transferred to other information services and functions, provided by other group of professionals. Information brokers, reference librarians and other types of **intermediaries** could considerably improve their communication skills and abilities if they will be trained in social science methodology and can grasp something from the natural talent of the gatekeepers.

Therefore most of the qualifications listed below can be considered as proposed goals of the (continuing) education programme for future information professionals.

## COMMUNICATION SKILLS

To be an effective gatekeeper, an individual must be well integrated into two networks: an **external network** of national and international information sources outside the organization and an **internal network** of domestic users to whom the required information can be delivered.

Communication skills, thus, are necessary not only for informal, personal contacts, but also to **maintain formal professional communication activities** on national and international level.

It has been found that gatekeepers actually do receive significantly more international technical information than their colleagues, measured by frequency of foreign correspondence and attendance at foreign scientific and professional society conferences. They also read and publish in a significantly greater number of journals.

Studies, fellowships and sabbaticals at foreign universities as well as foreign research employments seem to be other features strongly supporting the gatekeeper hypothesis. (Allen 1975)

Within the internal network one of the most appreciated functions of a gatekeeper is that of a **catalysator**: his ability to sift, select and filter information can protect the enquirer from information overload. This filtering function ensures that only information the transferred is that which bears on the problem in question.

**Human relations ability** is an other important condition for the shaping and development of the gatekeeper role. E.g., colleagues must place **trust** in the gatekeeper as individual when they involve him in their projects. The ability to analyze difficult situations and make appropriate recommendations are good reputations earned honestly and sincerely.



The gatekeeper as a problemsolver seems to have the capacity for perceiving that which is not obvious. **Intuition** is a cultivated capacity which with experience can work to the advantage of everybody, but it is one of those "natural talents" which gatekeepers are using intensively in their locating of new/relevant information for current tasks.

The attractiveness of this role implies also the element of **creativity** which can be defined as a combination of new and old ideas which will satisfy a need. Drawing upon a knowledge of resources and previous experiences, the gatekeeper must be creative and innovative in approaching unique situations and cull from past experiences those aspects which will work in the present situation.

Given the nature of this kind of "communication stars", the **opportunity to help and to provide a needed service to people** is most certainly an underlying motive for the development of gatekeeper role.

## **ANALYTICAL SKILLS**

Analytical skills as clarifying, analyzing and translating are necessary in satisfying information needs in problem solving situations.

The **enquire work** is likely to be one of the central features of the gatekeeper role and as such must be handled skilfully and efficiently. To understand exactly what is required, select and find the information and finally present it in a form understandable for the user, makes demands in terms of a logical and analytical thinking process. Technology assessments, information analysis, search strategies and issue analysis are some of the essential elements of these processes.

One important basis of the gatekeeper's information service is his ability to **scan and effective use different sources** such as journals, newspapers, newsletters, bulletins, abstracting and indexing services, online searching, etc. It means also the appreciation and the use of non-book printed materials such as looseleaf books and card services.

The gatekeeper increases the awareness of potential and actual information sources in his environment. This function, however, makes demands on **ability to handle the variety as well as the quantity of information** without feeling to be overloaded by it.

## SCHOLARSHIP AND BREADTH OF KNOWLEDGE

Despite the existence of a wide range of bibliographic tools and modern information techniques, information retrieval is not simply a matter of following certain routines but is still something of an art. Therefore, the talents esteemed by bookmen such as scholarship and breadth of knowledge are also fundamentals to the fulfilment of gatekeeper function.

In addition to his communication activity, the gatekeeper displays a somewhat greater **technical competence** than his colleagues. They are, on the average, significantly superior to their colleagues in terms of both publications and patents, and a higher proportion possess a Ph.D. degree. It has been shown that Ph.D. holders were more used to contact with both the literature and other specialists.

Technical performance is extremely difficult to measure, but to the extent that publication of scientific and professional papers and the acquisition of patents serves as an indicator, gatekeepers are **high performers** indeed.

## MULTIDISCIPLINARY INSIGHT

Since knowledge is inter-related and information is dispersed, this fact provides one of the basic justifications of the role of librarian as well as gatekeeper as a facilitator of the communication of information.

Bradford in his law of scattering stated, that to obtain all the relevant information on a topic it is normally necessary to ignore the boundaries between different fields. His message was mostly understood as the mathematical formulation for determining the optimum size of library collections but, yet ironically, little notice has been taken of it as theoretical support and giving prominence to the information specialists' function.

In our complex world, knowledge is being subdivided into an ever larger number of ever narrower specialities with the result that communication between the different types of specialist becomes increasingly difficult. Yet such communication is increasingly necessary: practical problems often require **contributions from experts in different fields**, and progress in one discipline frequently results from the application of knowledge of another discipline.

Thus, only individuals with sufficient grounding in their own discipline and with multidisciplinary insight are able to scatter relevant information in a manner of serendipitous discovery as well as in the form of interpersonal exchange, satisfying narrowly defined, specific information needs.

### Concluding remarks

Gatekeepers have an important role in the establishment and coordination of information networks and in the effective dissemination of knowledge and competence in organizations.

But, since the gatekeeper role is fundamentally natural and spontaneous it is difficult to dedicate this function. However, there is an interest in modern information management to "grow" this function and stimulate the development of effective information relayers and mediators. Therefore the analysis of the gatekeepers' general characteristics can be a useful guideline to improve the skills and competencies possessed by information professionals.

The role that modern information professionals are facing will demand a broad interpretation of professional identity and the ability to span disciplinary, institutional and methodological boundaries.

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