BP Puts Intelligence in Employees’ Hands
by Angela McKane
In 2002, oil and gas company BP assigned the running of its Naperville, Illinois, physical library and print subscriptions to a U.S.-based information management firm, LAC Group. Ten years later, following Angela McKane’s appointment as information capability manager, she worked with LAC to develop an entirely new concept and digital transformation of the corporate libraries that BP had worldwide.

McKane’s prior BP experience included roles in knowledge management, records management, and digital security. Before joining BP, she led data privacy and data management compliance for a number of organizations, including Transport for London, a local government body responsible for London’s transport system, including road, rail, bus and river services, and the London Underground.

The evolution of BP’s information service then accelerated further in 2017 as management appointed McKane to a newly-created role leading Technology Intelligence. Her team became part of the Business Development group, under the umbrella of Group Technology. According to McKane, this evolution of her team followed a fair degree of introspection within the broader organization.

Digital technologies offered new possibilities for the way in which information could be curated and disseminated to teams across the company. At the same time, they drastically changed the expectations of both current and prospective users of her team’s service offer.

“The physical library in Naperville really didn’t cut it anymore, unless you were an employee based there,” recalls McKane. “Employees based in the U.K. or Europe, especially the R&D staff, never connected with the library, and it was patchy to even get access to journals.”

The changing business landscape led the oil and gas giant to ask how it could build a staff that excelled at search and discovery of information, and also had the skill to build the right network of internal and external contacts. Experts within the company, like McKane, knew they had to modernize and transform the service from a library function to a high value intelligence offer.

In 2012, McKane recast the existing library model. She achieved some quick wins, such as consolidating subscriptions and reworking contracts that were in place but not used. She also found ways to save money while others at BP were feeling pressure to cut budgets. McKane’s team made certain that contracts reduced compliance risks while enabling digital sharing of content and collaboration between globally dispersed teams. Her quick successes won buy-in for McKane from executives, who trusted her with more investment to further transform the service.

Next came a plan to take the BP Library fully digital and, in fact, go mobile. With her pitch for a library app, McKane told BP executives that, though the days of the corporate library space were numbered, they were on the cusp of enabling each BP employee to have 1,000 articles in their pocket, evoking Steve Jobs’ unveiling for the original iPod in which he said, “This amazing little device holds 1,000 songs, and it goes right in my pocket.”

The Technology Leadership team approved the budget and BP sourced an app platform from a California start-up called Boopsie (since acquired by Demco), upon which they built the app using premium content feeds from third party news and analyst service providers. Launching the app on BP’s app store in January 2016, the team achieved 1,000 active users within 12 months, and the app is now the go-to source for on-the-move BP decision-makers who need 24/7, high-quality intelligence.

McKane now leads a global team of 10 who describe themselves as technology intelligence providers. With a third party supplying most of the team members, the team aligns and adapts with BP’s needs. Digital ways of working provide flexibility in terms of where her team members are based and how they support BP’s engineers and scientists across time zones.

Closing the library spaces and digitally transforming the service offer was a significant change for some team members. As McKane notes, “As with any change, the transition was not without some pain – especially in the early days.”

For any organization embarking on the same journey, McKane recommends managing expectations, building trust, and preparing to face resistance from some team members. She suggests creating an environment where people feel comfortable asking tough questions, without fear of retribution. And when decisions are made, she says, it’s critical to clearly state a course is set. In her experience, people come on board when they begin seeing goals met and successes racked up.

**Leading the Team**

McKane and her colleagues see themselves as consumers and curators of information. In a typical week, Boyle might come across a claim in the news that a company has emerged that is making fuel out of garbage, or a report that someone discovered algae that turns sunlight into fuel.

“Our team is part of BP Ventures, which considers this sort of thing,” says Boyle. “BP is expanding beyond getting oil or petrochemicals, and we help that process through research.”

**Making Intelligence Actionable**

Steve Boyle is a Colorado-based technology specialist on McKane’s team. He lives near the western entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park. Since the 1970s, he’s been part of the oil and gas industry having worked earlier in his career at Marathon Oil in a research center. He was also employed at a synthetic fuels company, and after that, he was in charge of a few labs that are now part of ConocoPhillips.

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needed. She arranged the funding, which made Ali’s team’s offsite library unnecessary, and provided his group with digital access to journals, patents, conference proceedings, and more.

“Most of what we need in research, we find through the sources Angela makes available,” remarks Ali. “In our business today, we need answers at our fingertips.”

What’s In a Name?

For McKane, a lot of thought went into developing her group’s function because she differentiates the group from conventional competitive intelligence. Business and competitive intelligence along with technology intelligence all exist within BP, but McKane hopes she can build something that’s synergistic between all disciplines. At BP, Group Competitive Intelligence keeps an eye on the competition and the competitive environment that the company operates in. McKane’s Technology Intelligence component complements this offer because it includes helping BP monitor disruptive technology trends that could change the way the industry works, or change oil demand in markets worldwide.

“We don’t want to miss something,” says McKane. “You need only look at Blockbuster’s disruption by Netflix to be reminded of technology’s role in enabling swift changes in consumer behavior.”

In addition, the team monitors start-ups, deal flow, investment opportunities, and more for BP’s business development towards a lower carbon future. As part of her team’s evolution, they now take on projects that support and collaborate with the Group Competitive Intelligence function.

BP is in a dynamically changing market worldwide. Energy transition necessitates gathering and analyzing some new or less traditional intelligence than would have been the case in previous years. Competitors now include players such as Google, Amazon, Apple, Tencent and Alibaba.
A New Mission, a New Identity

In McKane’s opinion, many corporate libraries would benefit from transforming their offer towards competitive intelligence. For information professionals to have the greatest contribution to strategic management, library experts say, they must have an in-depth understanding of the needs of the organization and its decision makers. Meeting those needs with a sense of urgency and delivering high-value actionable insights in a cogent, concise format via different channels is the goal.

For example, LAC Group CEO Rob Corrao, whose firm manages real-time and archived information for Fortune 500 and government agencies, says traditional library functions are vulnerable in terms of budgeting. “Today and tomorrow’s librarians need to see themselves as flexible information centers,” adds Corrao. “That’s what broadens the library’s mission and helps the corporation.”

McKane urges corporate librarians to develop a vision statement. Creating a plan and embracing a mission seems obvious, says McKane, but it’s surprising how often it is overlooked.

“I think it helped that I was going in as someone who had a grounding in information systems, but was not a librarian,” says McKane. “I looked at things in a different way, and it helped me see and transform processes that were in place simply because things had always been done a certain way.”

Looking to the Future

“In the corporate world, if you’re operating globally, you have to operate digitally to provide value with content,” adds McKane, “so it is unlikely corporations will maintain physical libraries.”

But McKane does see a role for libraries of all kinds as interactive learning centers as well as knowledge-sharing spaces where patrons try out the latest technology such as 3D printing, virtual reality, augmented reality and even reading rooms with hardback books.

“It’s a great time to work in data and information, and there is real opportunity for libraries, corporate librarians, and other information professionals to transform,” says McKane.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angela McKane leads Technology Intelligence at BP, part of the oil and gas company’s Group Technology practice. Prior to BP, her work included roles in knowledge management and digital security. She has also led data privacy and management for organizations including Transport for London. She earned her master’s in information science from Northumbria University.

Sam Chen, Senior Polymer Research Technologist and Maura Tillotson, Investigational Analytical Chemist, review analytical characterization of polymers for Castrol EDGE, in a laboratory at the Wayne Technology Center in New Jersey, USA. Photo source: BP p.l.c.