

# Message



**FROM Dr Nolwazi Mbananga,  
EXECUTIVE MANAGER**

## **INFORMATICS AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT**

An important starting-point in the business of knowledge management is understanding the difference between information and knowledge. Information is the data that are organised, grouped and categorised into patterns to create meaning. Knowledge is putting information to productive use for the right actions. Information is converted into knowledge in human, social processes of shared understanding and making sense of personal work environments and organisational levels. Knowledge requires people and particularly employees of the organisation and other stakeholders externally. Employees, their attitudes, behaviours, cultures and communities play a key role in managing knowledge – more so than is the case with information management (Shinozaki and Nagata, 2003).

Many organisations have approached knowledge management in the same way that they typically managed information, by focusing this process on technology first. The experience has shown that technology-driven solutions which do not embrace the employees generally, their work practices and work cultures, result in less effective knowledge management systems. However, well implemented technology that supports and is shaped by desired workplace values, behaviours and practices has a good chance of succeeding (Holtshouse, 2003).

### **Medical Research Council**

The MRC as a research organisation has managed to gain international recognition as a centre of excellence which produces world-class research products. This recognition has been reflected by the external funding which the MRC has received from international organisations over the years. The MRC recently won a tender to provide Secretarial Services for Clinical Trials in Developing Countries of Africa. This international recognition and trust suggests the need for an efficient and effective Informatics and Knowledge Management System of international standard and sophistication. For the MRC to survive as a player in the international world it will need to have knowledge networks and technologies which will enable it to share information with other international organisations of similar character. In this era of 'information economy', the knowledge-based organisation which isolates itself from international interaction and collaboration will be left behind and is bound to disappear.

To respond to the millennium goals and issues of globalization, the MRC will need to position itself as an international organisation of choice for the conduct of research commissioned by other countries.

#### **MRC Informatics and Knowledge Management Directorate**

The Informatics and Knowledge Management Directorate (IKMD) is facing very interesting times and challenges. The main task of this Directorate is to propel the MRC towards being a competitive knowledge-based organisation. This is a challenge; informatics and knowledge management should be turned around if the MRC is to survive within the knowledge economy of today and tomorrow.

### **Background**

It is an honour for me to join the Executive Management Committee of the MRC, and I am pleased to communicate to my colleagues within and outside the MRC through this medium.

It is becoming clear that systematic management of personal and collective information and knowledge in organisations yields substantial strategic value. Many organisations today are finding ways to manage their information and knowledge which will drive their business goals. Various organisations are adopting different strategies. These strategies are defined by the varying situations which are related to the starting-point, investment and measure of success. Areas which are gaining more attention recently are the importance of employees, their work, their work communities, the information and knowledge flows, and the technology in the management of information and knowledge.

The recipe to take the organisation into the future in the area of informatics and knowledge management is our strategy and its pillars and the available technical knowledge in the Directorate. This expertise will enable the organisation to compete with the very best in the world.

## The Divisions within IKMD

### The IKMD constitutes six Divisions:

- Library and Information Services (LISD);
- Information and Technology Services (ITSD);
- Web and Media Technologies (WMTD);
- Management Information and Knowledge Systems (MIKSD);
- Biomedical Informatics Research (BIRD);
- Regional Informatics Services KZN (RISD); and
- Health Informatics Research and Development (HIRD).

These Divisions have expertise in the various fields depicted by their names. It is important to highlight, however, that there are still some areas where expertise is lacking, especially in:

- Information Management
- Management Information
- Knowledge Management
- Science video and filming.

Regarding IT systems, the IKMD has a few systems in place to assist in executing the first three functions, but as yet nothing in the area of science filming. Science films and videos are media that will be used over and above what is in place to communicate science to the public and translate science into useful products.

## Creating a stable IKM environment within the MRC

The IKMD needs to create stability and continuity related to IKM within the organisation broadly. This can be achieved by a holistic approach in IKM policy-making and planning at the MRC. Any organisation without an inclusive approach to IKM is bound to depend on individuals' discretion in directing IKM policies and plans. In view of the transformational activities such as down-sizing, Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), retrenchment, empowerment fast-tracking and accelerated development taking place nationally, organisations will experience some turbulence. To prevent very deep and scary turbulence it is necessary to build in some 'shock absorbers'. The lifespan of executives in most organisations is five years, and changes in executives subject organisations to uncertainty and instability. Therefore, committees formed by more stable employees are crucial in creating stability and continuity. IKMD at the MRC has put in place, among others, the following democratic structures as 'shock absorbers' in the area of IKM: Strategy, Policy, Advisory Committee and Paperless Organisation Committee.

### 1. Advisory Committee

This committee is responsible for the providing advice in the planning and smoothing of IKM systems and policies. This committee carries the vision of IKM beyond the tenure of office of the current IKM Executive; it is seen as the pillar of continuity even with changes that will occur at IKM executive level.

### 2. Paperless Organisation Committee

This committee is responsible for the call from the EMC to reduce paper in the organisation. It is responsible for mapping, planning and launching the

organisation into a virtual (seamless) environment.

This is the biggest challenge that the Directorate will have to rise up to, because it goes hand in hand with change management, and cultural change in the organisation. This is the challenge that is marking the first step towards the MRC becoming one of the best knowledge-based organisations in the information society.

## 3. IKM Policy

The most difficult aspect is the development of an IKM policy, not only for the Directorate but also for the entire organisation. Policy-making in IKM today is challenged by a number of issues, such as:

1. Thirty Acts and legal regulations, both national and international, which play a role in IKM
2. Ownership of data information and knowledge
3. Data information and knowledge privacy and confidentiality
4. Power and politics in IKM.

The areas highlighted here aren't exhaustive but they are key issues and need thorough investigation and broad discussion, especially when it comes to IKM policy. Of no small significance is the fact that these challenges will be tackled not only by IKM staff but the wealth of scientific capabilities and expertise invested in the organisation's world-class scientists. The role to be played by scientists is paramount since these specialists are in fact producers of data, information and knowledge for the organisation.

Nevertheless, communities and other stakeholders, including human and non-human subjects, are the primary producers of data, information and knowledge at different levels along the continuum.

To face these challenges posed by IKM at the MRC, IKM customers in the organisation are placed at the centre of resolving the IKMD's turnaround strategy. The IKMD recognises that its main function is to help enhance the MRC's mandate in research by providing external IKM capacity, processing, storing and disseminating strategic and relevant research information within the MRC and to and from its stakeholders. The IKMD strategy, which is posted on the Intranet, outlines key strategic objectives in achieving the goals of both the Directorate and the MRC in endeavouring to realise the vision of building a healthy nation.

## IT as work and research environment

It is important to announce that every work environment is Information and Technology (IT). IT used to be a support service, but now it is just like a desk, pen and paper. Perhaps in future all IT equipment and accessories will be part of stationery! An interesting emergence at the MRC is the change from a research environment that is paper based into an IT environment. Today, gradually, research tools are becoming IT tools. This can mean that future researchers will require a reasonable skill in IT.

We believe that the Directorate is a strategic partner within the MRC that will play this role through teamwork which is defined within a strong culture and values of professional practice. We are a winning team and collectively we can make the difference.

Shinozaki, K & Nagata, A. (2003) A paradox of knowledge management in the case of Japanese retail company. *International Journal of Information Technology and Management*, vol. 2, nos. 1&2.

Hotshouse, D. (2003) Building a strategic focus on knowledge. *International Journal of Information Technology and Management*, vol. 2, nos. 1&2