

## **From strategy to action: the information management initiative at Monash University**

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### **Abstract**

An Information Management Strategy was developed for Monash University and publicly released in 2005. The 2005 University Planning Conference made implementing the strategy a key priority for 2006. A programme of technological and practice improvements was proposed, resulting in over 20 initiatives organised in four key themes. One theme, 'Working with information effectively and efficiently (WIEE)', was refined into a project that focused on practice improvements. (The other three themes dealt with delivering information and services using web technologies, providing high-quality management information, and supporting effective collaboration.) The WIEE project was undertaken in 2006 with the key deliverables of documenting and developing information management best practice, and attempting to make this practice common by means of an induction and ongoing training programme.

The Monash strategy models information management as needing to be instantiated in 4 different contexts: Individual, Workgroup, Corporate and Societal. These contexts determine the appropriate standards, techniques and tools to be applied in each. The WIEE project took both a top-down and a bottom-up approach. On the demand side it focused on the lower two information contexts, i.e., the 'individual', and 'workgroup' for practice improvement.

Of the 2006 programme of funded initiatives, the WIEE project stood somewhat apart because it did not have a system or technological implementation component. Elements of a knowledge management approach were utilised to develop and disseminate information management best practice, including group needs analysis and the creation of communities of practice.

While the strategy addresses all the members of the Monash university community, the WIEE project focused on Monash staff in the first instance. This decision was in keeping with the IM vision, 'Managing information to better create and share knowledge', as it was agreed that the staff experience held the greatest opportunity for significant improvement and benefits to students would flow from this.

## **Introduction**

The Monash University Information Management Strategy was developed to guide improvements to the manner in and methods with which the members of the university worked with information. The strategy was published in 2005 and the University Planning Conference determined that implementing the strategy would be a key strategic priority for 2006. The strategy would not become 'shelf ware'; there was an imperative to turn it into action. This determination provided essential executive and financial support for a number of projects and initiatives to commence or continue.

The particular project that is explored in this paper is the 2006 Information Management flagship project, 'Working for information effectively and efficiently' (WIEE). This paper takes a reflective look at the journey taken by the WIEE project and aims to provide valuable insights for organisations who wish to undertake a similar endeavour.

The WIEE project's primary tasks were to communicate the Information Management (IM) strategy and make the contents of the strategy relevant to and applicable by members of the Monash community. The application of the strategy was to be achieved through the development and dissemination of best practice for individuals and workgroups.

## **Information Management Strategy**

The journey of the strategy from development to implementation is covered in a separate paper (Treloar, 2006) and the strategy document is publicly available on the Monash university website.

The strategy is a comprehensive document of 114 pages. Its length is due to the inclusion of supporting material from the process to develop the strategy which included a study tour, background reading, and data-collection interviews (Treloar, 2004).

The strategy document was a primary reference tool for the WIEE project in developing the knowledge to be disseminated. In summary, the strategy document contains the following components:

1. Vision
2. Definitions
3. Research findings
4. Concepts & theoretical underpinnings
5. Principles
6. Recommendations

The spirit of the strategy's implementation is summarised in four themes. Strategic alignment of all the 2006 IM initiatives and projects was ensured by validation and association with one or more of these themes. The themes are:

- Working with information effectively and efficiently
- Delivering information and services using web technologies
- Providing high-quality management information
- Supporting effective collaboration

## **‘Working with information effectively and efficiently (WIEE)’ project**

The spirit of Monash’s IM initiative is people first rather than technology; that technology serves people who work with information. Thus there was a need to focus on improvements for peoples’ skills and practices. The WIEE project was to be a vehicle for helping people to work with information effectively and efficiently with the existing technological tools.

The WIEE project was conceived in mid 2005 at the direction of the Steering Committee. Funding was provided for a one year project with an estimation of 3 fulltime personnel who would collaborate with operational IM practitioners to achieve the projects objectives. The project had four initial key objectives:

1. Develop a coaching programme and provide target coaching in implementing IM business improvements for workgroups and individuals
2. Develop how-to documentation on best practice in IM for workgroups and individuals
3. Develop and deliver an induction and training programme
4. Communicate the IM Strategy to individuals and workgroups

The project commenced with the arrival of the project’s manager in early 2006, and the evolution of the project identified the need for a modified set of objectives. During the early activities with the initial coaching programme, researching existing knowledge and identifying user’s needs, the following issues were discovered:

- a) There was ambiguity between the conceptual boundaries of ‘information management’, ‘records management’ and ‘knowledge management’, which made searching and discovery of relevant knowledge problematic;
- b) There was little in the way of existing IM best practice knowledge that could be identified for re-use at Monash;
- c) What IM best practice knowledge existed was often intrinsically tied a technology solution and therefore had a limited shelf-life;
- d) There was little in the way of existing IM training to utilise, repurpose or adapt;
- e) The targeted coaching programme was time-intensive and resource-intensive to develop and deliver for relatively limited benefit;
- f) Coaching and/or training had limited impact due to the extent of collaboration and interaction around information activities while there were no centrally implemented university-wide guidelines on best practice;
- g) The diversity within Monash, and the IM needs of groups were varied requiring custom-like solutions - particularly given the variance in technology utilised by individuals and groups;
- h) People in working with information everyday had pragmatically come up with idiosyncratic solutions that worked for them; many solutions were innovative and appropriate to their context and would benefit others if shared;

- i) Many people wanted a quick-fix-just-give-me-the-right-solution-now response to their problem and did not want to (or could not) invest time understanding the problem or jointly developing a solution;
- j) Because all work has an information component and the information age has demanded the self-evolution of capability to address this, there was a sense (sometimes apologetic) that the 'current' way of working was 'wrong' and not the 'right' way;
- k) Many people were hungry for knowledge of how to work more systematically with information, especially pragmatic tips and tricks that they could readily absorb and apply;
- l) There was little documented knowledge in the form of models about IM skills or core competencies to guide training and support activities.

Upon reflection of the above findings, the project team determined that the WIEE project would need to incorporate the following:

- i. The concept of 'information management' would need to be defined and bounded at a pragmatic level to differentiate it from 'records management' and 'knowledge management'. The development of new knowledge for use at Monash should reinforce these conceptual boundaries.
- ii. Documentation, training and knowledge would need to be developed from a more fundamental and foundational perspective. This would require knowledge creation and sense-making activities in addition to research.
- iii. Best practice knowledge should be raised a level to be technology independent. This would increase its longevity while remaining pragmatic and readily applicable. Therefore the best practice knowledge that was developed would need to be developed and tested collaboratively.
- iv. One-size-fits-all solutions were not feasible, but neither were a myriad of custom solutions. IM best practice needed to be developed on two fronts: top-down with a community/corporate perspective of solutions to address corporate sustainability, and bottom-up with an individual or workgroup perspective of solutions to address demand and local context.
- v. University-wide operational guidelines were needed that were not limited by technology or location.
- vi. People's behaviour and beliefs would require a transition to a new way of acting and thinking to develop and adopt (or at least not sabotage) new systematic practices. This would require additional planning and resourcing for project activities.
- vii. The core competencies for IM would need to be defined so that skills could be appropriately assessed and developed. A framework and appropriate language would need to be developed in conjunction with appropriate staff development expertise.

viii. People could turn their own best practice into common practice. This would benefit others if their knowledge was valued and they had a mandate and method to share their knowledge. The WIEE project was ideally suited to facilitate this.

Because the WIEE project only had financial and human resources for 2006, the project focus shifted to establishing solid foundations for an IM approach that could be, at a minimum, self-sustaining beyond 2006. The words of Lao Tzu, “*Give a person a fish and you feed them for a day. Teach them how to fish and you feed them for a lifetime*” provided an appropriate metaphor to drive the efforts of the WIEE project.

The refined set of objectives became:

1. Establish a network of personnel interested and/or practicing IM to provide the basis for a true community of practice for IM
2. Establish and conduct a forum for regular gathering of members of the community
3. Establish a web presence for publishing IM material
4. Research, document and disseminate IM best practice that addresses current issues
5. Develop and deliver induction programme to inform new staff about IM at Monash
6. Develop (and where possible redevelop existing) training to provide staff with IM capabilities to address some immediate needs
7. Establish a consultancy model for IM and where appropriate test the model with targeted workgroups
8. Communicate the details and significance of the IM Strategy and its implementation to groups within the university

These objectives directed the project activities for 2006. In the section ‘***The journey so far***’, page 9, the achievements against these objectives are outlined.

## **Challenges for the WIEE project**

In turning the IM Strategy into actions that would meet the stated objectives, the WIEE project faced a number of challenges. Three challenges and the responses to these challenges are outlined here.

### **1. Need for a knowledge management approach**

The three main considerations for utilising a knowledge management approach were a) the need for new knowledge to be created (in the absence of suitable existing explicit knowledge), b) the need for sense-making of conceptual knowledge and making it applicable, and c) the unearthing of experiential knowledge and codifying it.

A decision was made to apply the ideas of Nonaka & Konno (1998) and ensure that the project team and collaborators had a shared space (based on Japanese

concept of 'ba') as well as a mandate to engage in the activities of knowledge creation and sense-making.

Dixon (2002) says that in creating a culture of sharing knowledge it is necessary to recognise the voluntary nature of sharing and reciprocate with appreciation of the act. With this in mind, any sharing of knowledge was appreciated through public affirmation or a thank you email or card, with a view to engaging in acts of appreciation as well as modelling desired behaviour.

One major challenge was the need to discover and create how-to knowledge about information management. A higher level of learning was required, the kind that Argyris (1991) describes as a genuine dialogical process of people actively collaborating to craft new solutions and courses of action and develop new behaviours. One response to learning challenge was to engage in such a process to 'make sense' through team interaction of 'what I understand about information management' and 'what I do well in working with information'. Once members of the project team could converse about 'why individuals should care' and 'what can be done to be more effective' then they could share that understanding through personal narrative.

The notion of community of practice, "groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise", as described by Wenger and Synder (2000) was also utilised. One example was relationships with other IM practitioners, e.g. Records Management personnel. The challenge was to participate in meetings where participants would come away with more questions than answers and still view the meeting as a satisfying encounter. Over time group members were able to look back and recognise the value in such sense-making engagements in terms of personal growth as well as stronger relationships and understanding.

## **2. Managing transition effectively**

The informal goal for the WIEE project was "Making it easy to do the right thing". Information management at Monash is positioned as a facilitative function of an organisation and it was accepted that not everybody would be intrinsically motivated to improve their information management practice.

It was decided that the project team would operate on the presumption that people want to do the right thing. A second presumption was that people may not be doing the right thing because they didn't know what was the right thing (so we should tell them), they didn't know how (so we should show them) and there were obstacles to doing the right thing (so we should remove these).

As expounded above in talking about a knowledge management approach, one challenge was to package the knowledge about information management and the strategy into digestible applicable content. One response to this challenge was to condense the 114 page strategy document to a usable summary for general reading. Another was to present the same summary at group information sessions and address questions and local concerns as they arose in a face-to-face forum.

One key response to facilitating user transition was the creation of a user community with the focal point of the IM Forum. This forum would be the place where users could express their ideas and concerns and be nurtured as they discovered and adopted new practices. This tactic was influenced by the description and explanations

of Gladwell (2000) in his book *The Tipping Point*: that “small close-knit groups have the power to magnify the epidemic potential of a message or idea” (p. 174).

### 3. Moving from concepts to pragmatics

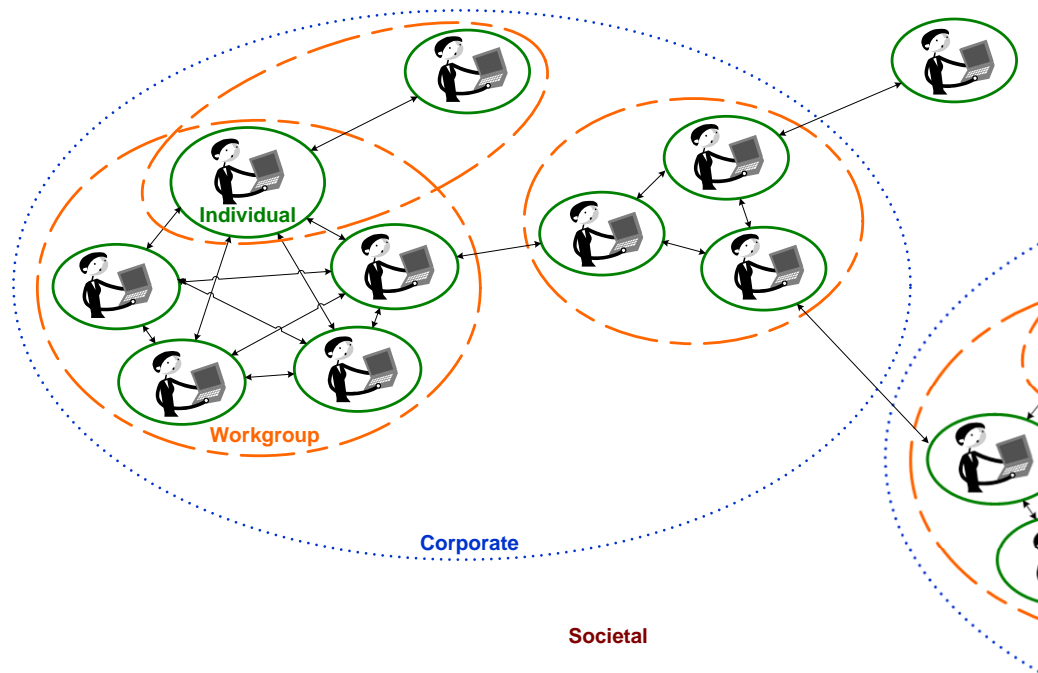
There were three key concepts that needed to evolve and facilitate meaningful dialogue in both developing pragmatic knowledge and disseminating that knowledge. The three concepts are briefly outlined here to provide an indication of the knowledge development undertaken in the WIEE project.

#### **Information Context**

The strategy document provides the theoretical idea of ‘information context’. There are four information contexts: individual, workgroup, corporate, and societal. Context is an attribute of the information.

Individuals will typically work with information belonging to all information contexts. Each context has different regulatory requirements, and often different technologies and practices are used to fulfil these requirements. Sometimes the wrong technology or practice is utilised because staff have not correctly determined an information’s context. For this reason the IM Strategy directs: “The information management environment for Monash University needs to provide guidance to people to help them correctly select the right context and the standards that thus apply” (p. 28).

Figure 1 illustrates a diagrammatic perspective of the concept as it was developed for explanatory purposes. (See also Figure 2 below.)



**Figure 1 Information Contexts**

**Records vs. Information vs. Knowledge**

The IM Strategy provides a theoretical response to the question about the difference between the concepts of ‘information’ and ‘knowledge’ (pp. 22-25). However ‘records’ were not specifically defined. The field of records management is more mature and often promoted as synonymous with information management, so a working definition was needed for clarification. This definition sought to clarify the relationship between the concepts of ‘records’ and ‘information’, and identify the gaps that would need to be addressed in developing best practice. The working definition was: information can be divided into two subsets or broad types, ‘records’ and ‘non-records’, which are not mutually exclusive.

Figure 2 below brings together the two aspects of information context and broad type to illustrate a way of thinking about the scope of IM interventions at Monash. The model has two dimensions that create eight zones where each zone potentially has different guidelines, practices and tools.

CONTEXT	INFORMATION (Broad Type)	
	Records	Non-records
Individual	1 I-R	5 I-NR
Workgroup	2 W-R	6 W-NR
Corporate	3 C-R	7 C-NR
Societal	4 S-R	8 S-NR

**Figure 2 The 8 zones of Information contexts and broad types**

This model has provided a useful reference tool for the creation of new knowledge as well as the sharing of that knowledge from a common framework.

**Organising knowledge about IM**

Information Management, as it pertains to non-records types of information, is a relatively new domain of knowledge. As such no satisfactory model or schema could be discovered to define the core competencies/ skills and/or best practice guidelines for a skilled everyday IM practitioner dealing with non-record type of information. The challenge was the necessity to create a new and usable schema within a domain where the base concepts and language were varied and ambiguous. This challenge was not concluded in 2006; an external consultant was engaged to do initial research and this combined with the project team’s groundwork thinking and discussions are expected to evolve into a first draft schema in 2007. The schema will be used to organise knowledge about IM core competencies and skills, training needs as well as best practice guidelines for common activities in working with information.

## The journey so far

This paper is written at the end of the WIEE project, so it is timely to reflect on what the WIEE project delivered and achieved.

**Table 1 WIEE Deliverables and Achievements 2006**

<b>Deliverable</b>	<b>Achievement</b>
1. IM Network	The IM Network mailing list has 140 members. A more formal network is to be developed as part of the 'IM for Workgroups Framework'; the vision is a standing network of IM Officers across the organisation akin to the network of safety officers.
2. IM Forum	The IM Forum was established and ran 6 sessions from June – December 2006. The IM Forum will continue as a permanent IM service to the university.
3. IM Website	A website was completed with sections on IM Forum, IM Training, IM Resources, IM Strategy, IM Contacts, Implementing IM
4. IM Resources	A knowledge base with an initial set of 'How-to' and 'Reference' resources were developed and published on the website. Resources were synergistically aligned with the content focus of each IM Forum gathering. Other resources created and disseminated include posters and the desktop paper device, the 'Dode' to promote the IM Principles.
5. & 6. IM Training & Induction programme	A new course was developed: 'Organising your information' and delivered 3 times. An existing course is being redeveloped 'Working smarter with email' and will be completed in 2007 as part of the new email application implementation. A staff induction presentation was developed 'Guide to Information Management at Monash' and delivered across 6 campuses in 13 sessions. IM was included in 'Welcome to Monash' staff induction programme.
7. IM Consulting	A few group consults were held with mixed results. From this experience, the consultancy model grew into the 'IM for Workgroups (IM4W) Framework'. IM for Workgroups is a 'franchise' model which includes strategic and tactical focused documentation, an implementation methodology, and links to other university policies and frameworks. The intent of the framework is to provide a comprehensive and replicable solution to implementing IM best practice per workgroup across the university. (The IM4W framework is the subject of another paper by the same author to be published in 2007.)

<b>Deliverable</b>	<b>Achievement</b>
8. Communication	Various presentations were prepared and delivered in face-to-face interaction with small groups across the university. These engagements were an opportunity to establish a dialogue that related to each group's understanding, concerns and context.

A story-telling competition was run to encourage staff to share their good ideas and successes in changing their IM practices. Here is one extract that illustrates the influence of the WIEE project.

*“In my new position of acting manager, I feel that my strong stance in favour of best practice regarding information management has an effect on the team. I ensure I 'walk the talk', so the team understands I am serious about this project. When working on their performance plans, we have agreed on individual portfolios, and this means maintaining the portfolio's folders, archives, and sharing the knowledge with the team and external clients.*

*On the other hand, since starting our information management project, I have realized that it is not a quick fix and cannot be done in a hurry. Otherwise the staff will see it as a burden, an additional task to their workload. By making small, but regular changes, we will have a strong adoption of the information management concepts we are learning via the IM forums.” ~ RB*

Stories can be found at <http://www.monash.edu.au/staff/information-management/stories/>

## **The next steps**

While the WIEE project closed at the end of 2006, the broader IM initiative at Monash continues. The IM Steering Committee remains and meets regularly to provide governance for the IM environment. In 2007 there are more than 15 projects and initiatives that continue to advance the IM improvements at Monash.

The main IM initiative for the next two years, the Integrated Collaboration Environment (ICE) will focus on the ‘Supporting collaborative activity’ theme with the implementation of new collaboration technology enabling better and more collaborative activity within and without the university. The IM for Workgroups Framework, an innovation that germinated under project WIEE to address IM practice at the workgroup level systematically across the university, is being further developed as a synergistic component of ICE.

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