

No business without information products

chapter 2

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This chapter presents the argument that I make in this book in compact and largely visual form. It acts as a bridge between the explanations of the last chapter, and the detailed look at information products in the context of the organizations that produce them which forms the subject of Part 2.

The argument

1 Organizations have no business without information products, because:

- Knowledge is created and lives invisible inside human minds
- It's made visible, communicated, and exchanged only when people transform it into Information, and put it into Information Products (*see* Figure 2.1 p26).

2 Information Products are therefore:

- Knowledge made visible
and by virtue of that they are:
- Information Resources – which have to be managed,
and
- the carriers by which Information gets around.

3 That being so, we should:

- Recognize them as essential elements in whatever the organization does
- Manage them as an essential element of Knowledge Management and Information Management
- Support their creation and use with appropriate infrastructure and human resources
- include them in the organization's strategies for Information and Information Systems (*see* Figure 2.2 p28).

Now let us expand a little on the elements of this argument.

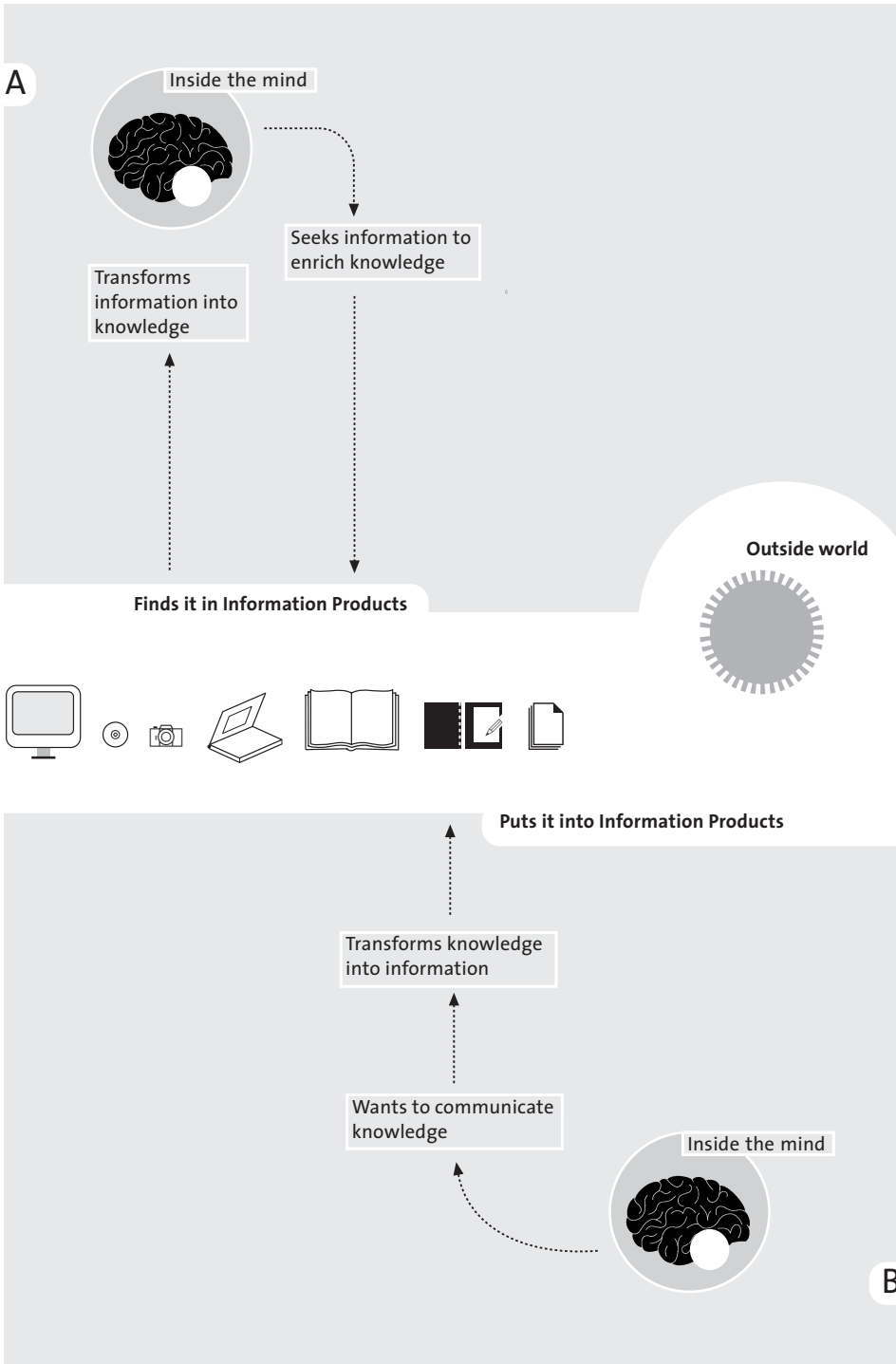


Figure 2.1 How information products support knowledge exchange

What information products should do for organizations

Information products should serve the organizations which create them by acting as:

1 Representations of their values and knowledge

All organizations need to understand 'their' outside world and to exchange information with it, and all need self-knowledge and internal exchanges of information. Information products are the vehicles by which their values and knowledge reach those outer and inner worlds, and by which internal and external exchanges of information and knowledge take place.

The Co-operative Bank

e This small retail bank – with a record of being highly successful and profitable, distinguished by its pioneering ethical policies, high level of customer satisfaction and staff commitment, and successful use of technology – provides a good example of IPs that perform this role. Particularly noteworthy are its Partnership Reports, detailed and sometimes self-critical accounts, produced by the Bank and externally audited, of how the bank has fulfilled its responsibilities to the 'partners' it identifies as involved in its activities or affected by them. It uses its IPs actively to present its ideas and to seek exchanges with customers and other 'partners', as the basis for informed action and innovation. (see Chapter 3, pp54 to 56) for a discussion of how the Bank's culture influences its information products).

2 Agents in transformation, diffusion and organizational learning

Constant transformation of knowledge to information and information to knowledge is vital for the progress of organizations. Information products are the medium for those transformations, and by virtue of that they are essential for communication, exchange and 'trade' of knowledge and information, inside the organization and between it and its outside world.

Information brought into organizations by their staff from their interactions with the outside world can become a source for organizational learning and the diffusion of new knowledge. But it can do so only if it gets embodied in information products and made accessible throughout the organization by means of well-managed information systems and stores.

The Office of Government Commerce

e This independent Office of the UK Treasury is responsible for providing guidance and expertise to support the successful delivery of procurement-based projects and other forms of commercial activity. As Figure 2.3 (p29) shows, the essence of its work is 'trade' in knowledge and information, and that trade depends on managing the knowledge and information brought into, and created inside, the organization as an accessible resource for learning and spreading knowledge. Information products are a critical element of the trade.

3 The repository of organizational memory

Information products, if properly managed, can be the repository of organizational memory, a resource of knowledge of what the organization did and thought in the past,

the outcomes of its actions, the lessons of experience, the knowledge legacy of people who no longer work for it,

Experience from information audits, however, shows that many organizations lack appropriate information products to embody the results of projects, the lessons of failures as well as of successes, or the valuable knowledge of former staff. So a resource that could bring better return on investment, save repeating costly errors with the

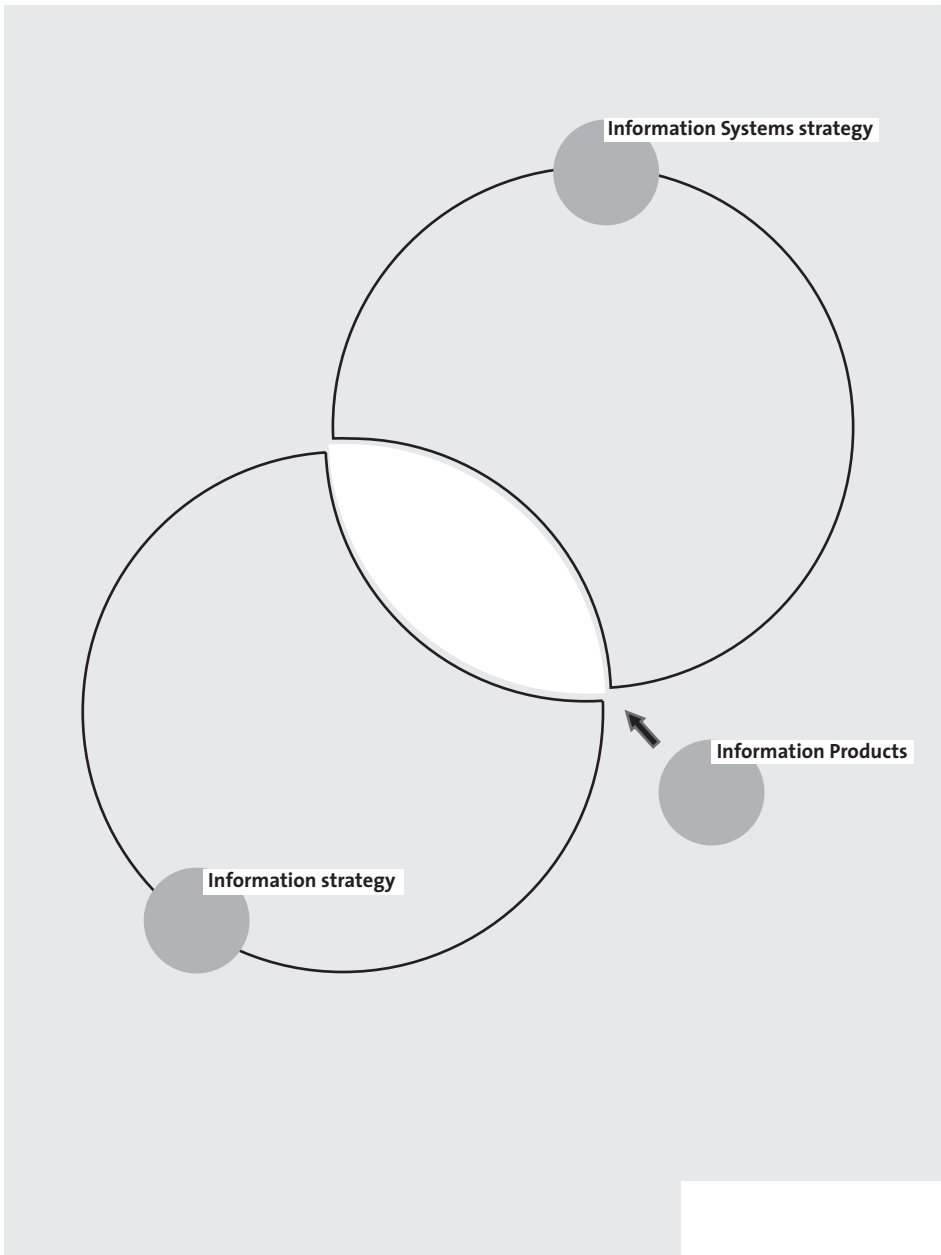


Figure 2.2 We should include information products within the organization's strategies for Information and Information Systems

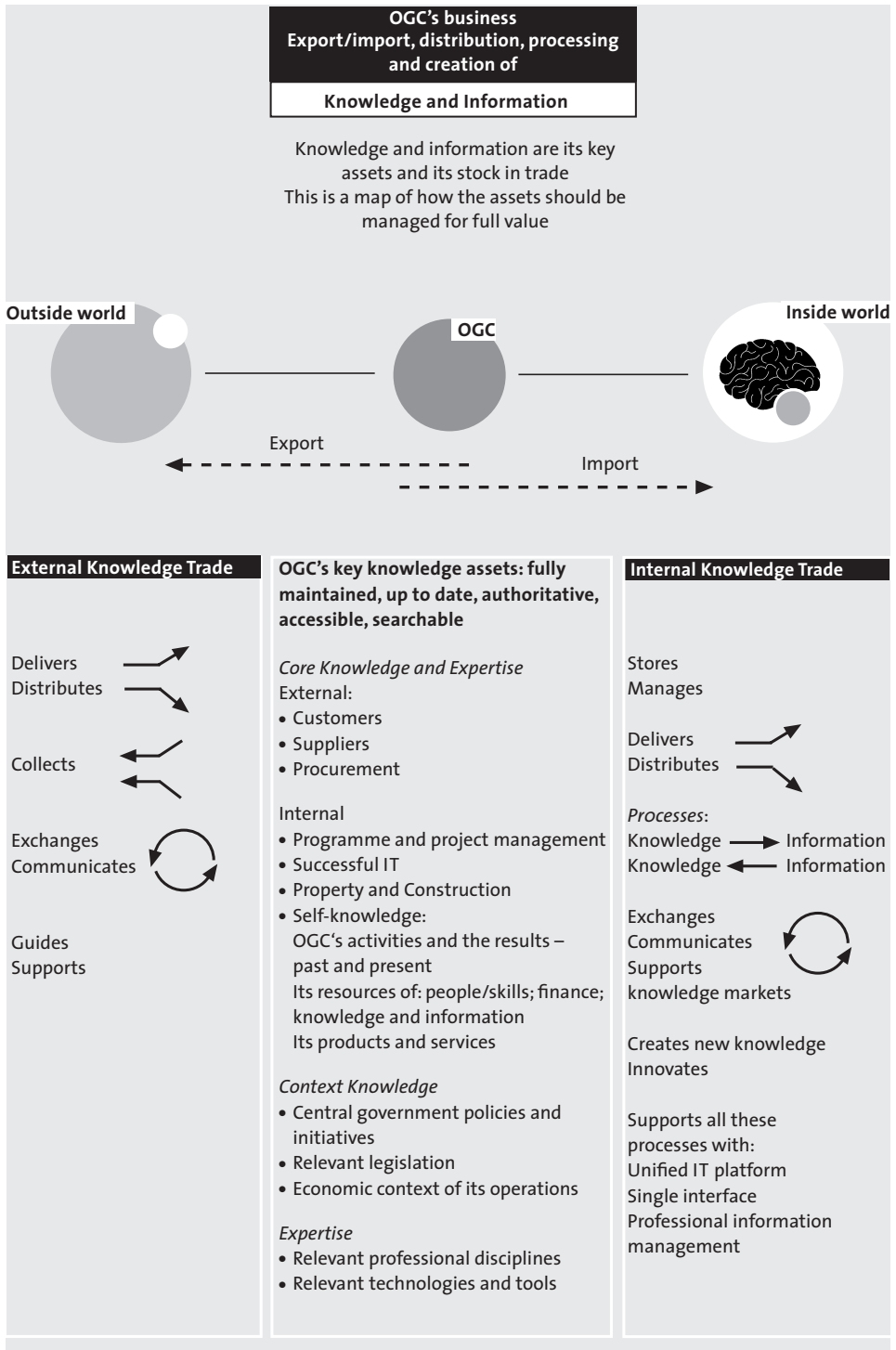


Figure 2.3 A picture of 'What Should Be' (reproduced by permission of the Office of Government Commerce)

associated risk, and prompt profitable new ideas, cannot be drawn on. The lack tends to be connected with patterns of information culture and behaviour – the organization's attitude to mistakes, and levels of confidence and trust among staff and between them and management. People who work in such organizations complain that learning from experience is hampered or downright impossible because there is no formal requirement for this kind of memory to be recorded and made accessible, or indeed that doing so is actively discouraged.

The context in which we should consider IPs

Information products are created on behalf of organizations, by people, for people, with the help of systems and technologies. So we need to consider them in that total context, which seems obvious, but is not often done; the originating organizations and their interests are seldom taken into account, nor is the full range of stakeholders in them. It is helpful to think of IPs in a fourfold context, as shown in Figure 2.4 on page 31:

- 1 The organization – what it is in business for, the processes by which it carries out its business, its 'information culture', that is, the way people think and about information, and how they behave in using it.
- 2 The value – tangible and intangible – which IPs add (or subtract).
- 3 The stakeholders – all the people, inside the organization and outside, who have an interest in the products and a potential contribution to make to them. (These aspects of the context are discussed in Chapters 3–5).
- 4 The support IPs need – from appropriately managed information and knowledge resources, from relevant technologies, and from information design. This is the subject of part 3 (Chapters 6–8).

Why IPs should be part of an overall information strategy

The basic argument states that IPs should be an element in the information strategies of organizations. Here, we can expand it like this. (We shall return to ideas about bringing IPs within information strategy, as part of a programme of change, in Chapter 12.)

- If IPs are, as they are described at the start of this chapter, the embodiment of knowledge transformed into information, then by virtue of that they operate on the frontier of information management – at the point where people meet the information they seek and start transforming it into knowledge for action. The importance of that process for success in achieving whatever organizations are in business to achieve is the key reason why they need a strategy for knowledge and information.
- IPs are the main objects which information management manages; and their creation is a culminating point in the process of knowledge management, because it makes knowledge accessible in the form of information, and allows it to travel around to where it's needed.
- Integrating them into knowledge and information strategy strengthens their position, and links them – like all other aspects of knowledge and information – with organizational strategy. That protects them from floating about in a void, at the mercy of territorial battles, vanity, or cost-cutting.

- Integrating them in this way makes it possible to establish criteria for what they're supposed to achieve for the organization, and to evaluate how effectively they do it.
- And finally, as a principal means by which information gets around, they can make a link between communication and information, which in most organizations are separated by an unbridged gulf.¹

¹ Meyer and Zack (1996) advance some other original and convincing reasons for bringing IPs fully into organizational information strategy. They look at information products in the same way as physical ones, and liken their 'manufacture' to refining. The process consists of acquiring raw materials; refining them (activities to make products accessible to users, from indexing to analysing trends by means of appropriate software); storing and retrieving them; distribution; and presentation – 'ensuring ease of use and sufficient functionality is part and parcel of the information product itself'. To manage its information products successfully,

an organization needs an appropriate technological infrastructure; knowledge about its own business; external knowledge about its current and emerging markets; and self-knowledge – understanding of how it organizes and manages itself. If it does that, it can create new information products very quickly and cheaply compared with the costs for physical products. And the authors believe that the greatest potential lies in the acquisition and refinement stages, rather than in the output-end technology.

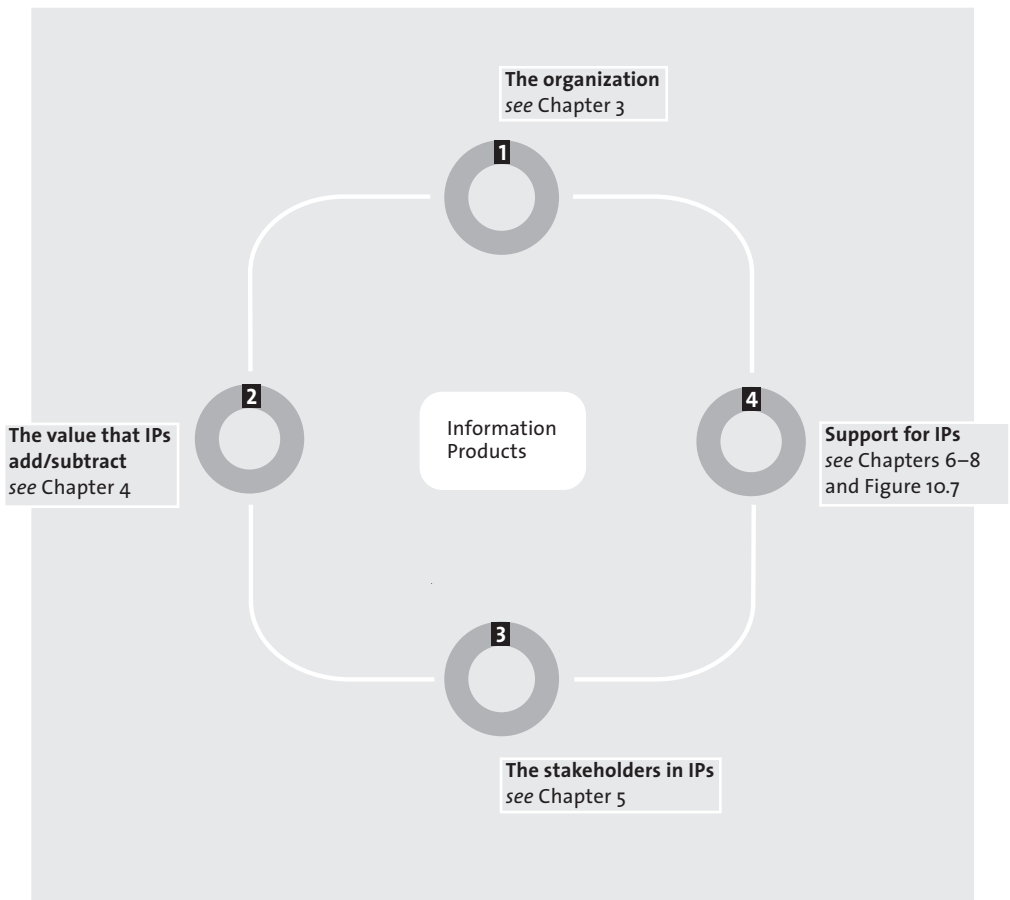


Figure 2.4 Information products in context

The final stage of the argument – if you want to do something about it...

As this is a practical book, as well as arguing a case, it has to suggest how to act on it.

The underlying argument at this point is that any change process should start by:

- 1 Asking and answering questions to establish what should be happening
- 2 Finding out what is actually happening at present
- 3 Comparing the two, in order to see where there are serious and important differences; these will be the focus for change.

Because if you don't have a reasonably accurate map of where you are starting from, you may well finish up some distance from where you intended to get to.

This approach, which is proposed in the final part of this book, is a well established one, usually called Information Auditing.

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