

# online consultants international

28th October 2009  
Karlsruhe, Germany

## The SLA Name Change – A View From Germany

Dear Katie,

As you know I have recently taken over the role of SLA Representative for Germany. Like many other colleagues I have been pondering the SLA name change. My thoughts on the matter which were to form the basis of a reply to your e-mail to SLA Europe on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2009, have grown from being a tidy e-mail size. So instead, I thought I would pen them as an open letter. Please feel free to include this on the SLA Europe website for members and colleagues to react to, add to, even complain about - as they see fit.

As good fortune would have it, I met with Janice R. Lachance CEO SLA on the morning after the name change was announced. Janice was about to give the key-note address at the annual conference of the **German Society for Information Science and Practice (DGI)**.<sup>1</sup> She mentioned the new name and asked me how I liked it. My spontaneous reaction was honest, telegraphed by a poorly concealed grimace and drew from Janice a suitable frown. I mention this incident not to flag the likelihood that my days as SLA Representative in Germany may now be numbered but to emphasise that any reaction to such a big decision elicits both a visceral and a rational response. Put in another way, it would be prudent to listen to both the belly and the brain on this one.

For my part, having now taken some time to look at the Alignment Project results to absorb the discussion and debate whizzing around the SLA listservs as well as reflect on options and alternatives, I now declare myself an enthusiastic supporter of the new name proposed for the SLA Board of Directors, namely the **Association for Strategic Knowledge Professionals**. Where with respect to the name, reason has triumphed over viscera; the belly however is still unsettled with respect to the proposed acronym, "ASKPro". Like many other colleagues, I am not able to warm to the acronym.

Nevertheless, I believe that discomfort with the ASKPro acronym need not be a sufficient reason to reject the SLA name change proposal. Rather, with a little imagination and flexibility, the acronym can be polished into acceptance so that it too positively contributes towards fulfilment of the Alignment Project's objectives.

---

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.dgi-info.de/ProgrammOnlineTagung2009.aspx>

# online consultants international

In what follows below, I have set out my observations and thoughts on the proposed SLA name change, in an attempt to explain why I shall be voting for the recommendation of the SLA Board. The comments and ideas are given in the hope that my meandering will provide a direction if not an actual route for others through this complex landscape. My earnest recommendation to all readers is that they acquaint themselves with the Alignment Project materials.<sup>2</sup> That they contemplate and digest the evidence and in turn come to a considered decision giving weight to the reaction of both belly and brain.

## 1. The proposed new name for the SLA

The key reason I have come to support the new name is because it is a **pragmatic response**, yet at the same time a **promising solution** to the challenge the SLA set itself with the Alignment Project. As stated in the Alignment Process Backgrounder,<sup>3</sup>

*“This alignment project will not only help refine our current positioning in the marketplace, but provide a framework for discussing the profession and the Association in a clear, compelling and cohesive voice.”*

### 1.1. A pragmatic response

By focussing not just on knowledge but explicitly on knowledge as an essential strategic asset within organisations the proposed name succinctly refines the market position of people whose jobs involve the “management and delivery of information- and knowledge-related activities.” Most importantly, the refinement strikes out in an innovative direction by focussing on the value being contributed by information and knowledge specialists, and the perception thereof, rather than their formal functions or descriptions of the tasks they perform.

My personal view is that this latter point is key to understanding the ideas driving the new name change and is – I have the impression – at times being overlooked in some of the commentary and criticism following the announcement. The Alignment Project is not about selecting a name for the SLA that embraces all its members. This would be a fruitless undertaking, and pretty much an impossible one in an 11,000 strong membership that already sports some 2,000 job titles! <sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/alignment/portal/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/alignment/portal/explore.html> / Alignment Project Backgrounder / Page 1

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/governance/namechange/ga.cfm> We have a similar problem in Germany. The professional image or “Berufsbild” of information and knowledge workers is obscure and has not been helped by the extensive but loose use of English terms to describe jobs of German information professionals.

# online consultants international

The point I want to emphasise is that in assessing the various merits of the new name, greater consideration should be given to whether the new name better connects the target community (i.e. librarians, information and knowledge management practitioners) with the decision-makers (i.e. senior management) within the organisations that, put bluntly, decide their fate. And, here I think the answer is yes.

One of the major advantages of the proposed new name, **Association for Strategic Knowledge Professionals** is that it uses vocabulary that is more accessible to management. It is tempting to be cynical about “management speak”. In fact as librarians, information and knowledge specialists we should be particularly critical as ours is an area where the “accelerated change” that has now become our daily lives is most apparent. Just by way of illustration, does your organisation maintain a website or a “web estate”? Is “information promiscuity” a problem among your users? Does “banner blindness” have an adverse impact on marketing budgets? And so on. My point is that the language we use or is used about us reflects relationships and in particular power relationships – and/or the lack of them. This is what the SLA name change is really all about.

Even if we struggle with the aesthetics of the new name, does the appellation **Association for Strategic Knowledge Professionals** get us up into the mindset of decision-makers and eventually into the higher echelons of management? My answer here is yes, it does. Later on I shall be looking at the new name’s constituent terms and those terms, namely “information” and “librarian” that were left out. Here I want to briefly consider the term “professionals”.

On the use of the term “professionals” in the proposed new name, reason has also had to overrule viscera. I have never liked the term “information professional”. To my immense disappointment and irritation it has entered into regular usage in Germany becoming accepted “Neu Deutsch”! And that, for want of anything better in the land of Goethe and Schiller!

Nevertheless, as Geraldine Clement-Stoneham has pointed out, the use of the term “professional” reinforces an association with other acknowledged professionals such as doctors, lawyers and scientists all of whom cultivate and apply knowledge as their best personal asset and – used cooperatively and collectively – as a corporate asset. If we want to have library, information and knowledge-based activities accepted and respected as an essential corporate function on a par with finance, HR and IT, we are virtually obliged to embrace terms such as “professionals” in order to help us achieve that goal.

## 1.2. A promising solution

The new name is also promising because it is new, unusual and needs getting used to. The **Association for Strategic Knowledge Professionals** and the core idea of “strategic

# online consultants international

knowledge” in organisations can now become what we make of it. In this respect, the new name fulfils the requirement of producing a “framework for discussing the profession and the Association in a clear, compelling and cohesive voice.”

In other words, the attraction of the new name lies in the very fact that it uses terms that are not yet laden. True, the phrase “strategic knowledge” may not yet be too familiar to senior management, however, the concepts of “strategy” and “knowledge” definitely are. The value of the new name to the SLA is that it strikes a balance between being a good connector on the one hand, yet is empty enough on the other hand to enable the SLA to load it with associations to benefit the membership.

A possible role model here – and one I would recommend readers to have a look at - is from the public sector in the United Kingdom. The UK government has recently set up the **Government Knowledge and Information Management Network (GKIMN)** which is part of The National Archives.<sup>6</sup> The GKIMN is the team that supports the delivery of the knowledge and information management strategy for government and is the Secretariat for the Knowledge Council. The GKIMN also oversees the **Government KIM Professional Skills Framework** which “provides government with a common language with which to describe the specialist attributes that characterise knowledge and information management professionals. It is designed to sit alongside the other elements of the PSG requirements, for use in recruiting, promoting, appraising and developing knowledge and information management professionals in government.”<sup>7</sup>

Although The National Archives have come to the creation of the GKIMN from another direction, their views are similar to those of the SLA Alignment Project in that the goal is to promote knowledge and information management within government organisations as a corporate function on equal terms with IT, HR and finance. Notice too the persistent reversal of the order of the terms “information” and “knowledge” in “KIM – Knowledge and Information Management”. This order as well as the use of the term “function” in GKIMN Function, also needs getting used to.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.3. The need to let go of the term “Information”

Although this may sound odd, one of the attractions to me of the new name is that it does not include the word “information”. To have done so would have eroded what I have earlier referred to as the succinct refinement in the proposed name. I say this however, with a very heavy heart.

---

<sup>5</sup> All ready back in 1993 Peter F. Drucker was talking about the productivity of knowledge. See Peter F. Drucker, Post-Capitalist Society, Butterworth-Heinemann, London 1993, pages 169-173.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://gkimn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> See <http://gkimn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/framework.htm>

<sup>8</sup> See <http://gkimn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/faqs-on-the-gkimn-function.pdf>

# online consultants international

One of my few lamentations in all my years as an information specialist is that the information community – as opposed to the information technology community – has effectively failed to occupy the high ground regarding the use of the term “information” in job titles. The most glaring example of this is the use of “CIO” or Chief Information Officer to describe the role of an IT person. In Germany, the most senior public official charged with overseeing the Federal IT programme describes his role as that of a “CIO”<sup>9</sup>. There is a CIO magazine<sup>10</sup> and like Germany’s Federal CIO as used here, refers to IT management and not unusually to the specific notion of IT procurement.

My purpose is not to demonise our IT colleagues but rather to reinforce the pragmatic stance taken by the SLA in its choice of **Association for Strategic Knowledge Professionals**. It is quite a challenge to clearly position SLA members - whose daily work involves handling information - for a future in an environment dominated by managers whose immediate reflex is to associate any reference to the term “information” automatically with IT.

In this respect, the SLA’s choice of the new name is a fine example of “Realpolitik” and one that I support out of a sense of grudging pragmatism. My fear is that the information community has lost the chance to effectively (re)possess the term “Information” in job titles. Only recently, in Karlsruhe I attended a seminar on cloud computing hosted by the newly created “KIT” – Karlsruhe Institute of Technology.<sup>11</sup> A technical event, the speakers – all IT people – were already encroaching upon information management territory and its role in driving business and cultural change.

Another example is provided by AIIM,<sup>12</sup> the Global Association for the Enterprise Content Management Industry which describes itself as leading the way to understanding, adopting and using ECM technologies. This organisation has recently issued a document called “*8 reasons you need a strategy for managing information – before it’s too late...*”. Why are not information and knowledge management specialists more vocal and present in these areas?

Wearing another hat I supervise a DGI Working Group entitled **Information Competence in Businesses**. Although still early days, it is already noticeable that companies are beginning to look at and even embrace an information agenda. However, their motivation for doing so often has less to do with business development in the positive sense but rather is prompted by the need to comply with regulations and to manage the risks of failing to do so. Who is beginning to

---

<sup>9</sup> See [http://www.cio.bund.de/cfn\\_103/DE/Home/home\\_node.html](http://www.cio.bund.de/cfn_103/DE/Home/home_node.html)

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.cio.com/>

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.kit.edu/>

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.aiim.org.uk/index1.asp>

# online consultants international

occupy management minds regarding information risk and compliance? Again IT firms and their respective professional associations such as AIIM and BITKOM.<sup>13</sup>

Associations like the SLA and the DGI have a lot to do to raise the awareness and understanding of these issues within their respective memberships. After all, information risk, compliance and business development are key areas within organisations where strategic knowledge can be cultivated and applied most effectively.

So once again, we return to the need for the SLA to find a constructive means of forcing a presence onto a management agenda. Maintaining the term “Information” in the title of the Association is not likely to help. We would end up spending too much time trying to defend our turf vis-à-vis IT people. The new name and in particular the idea of “strategic knowledge” which has (as Guy St Clair describes it<sup>14</sup>) the connotation of an asset greater than common knowledge will help SLA members to more clearly delineate their speciality and contribution to their organisation vis-à-vis their peers from other business units. A clearer delineation will in turn assist SLA members and the management of the organisations they work for to better understand their contribution to the organisation’s productivity.

In conclusion, the combination “strategic knowledge” also has a connotation of value and rank. It might help here to set ourselves scenarios and experiment with them. For example, we know that in the past, libraries and information departments have been outsourced if not actually closed down. Would management be so quick to shut down a department responsible for the organisation’s strategic knowledge? I would like to think they would hesitate to do so. And here is the essence of our future challenge. If we load the new name with the right associations, activities and performance, then closing down such an asset would be tantamount to corporate suicide.

## 1.4. The appropriateness of not using the terms “library” and “librarians”

For different reasons I am also not sorry to see the absence of the term “library” or “librarian” in the new name. I should add here that I am not a librarian and have never worked in a library. However, in addition to mentioning my participation on a project involving **Europeana**<sup>15</sup>, I would also add that I have nevertheless worked with many librarians over the years and am an avid user of libraries.

The library world is in a state of turmoil and flux. Libraries are on the cutting edge – and for many of them the bleeding edge of the drive into the so-called information society and knowledge

---

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.bitkom.org/en/Default.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> See <http://smrknowledge.blogspot.com/2009/10/strategic-knowledge-professionals.html>

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.europeana.eu/portal/index.html>

# online consultants international

economy. If the SLA finds its name change a problem, spare some thought for the University of Sheffield which changed its library name to the “**Information Commons**”.<sup>16</sup> Although the name change as well as the notion of “commons” takes time to get used to, the use of the word “commons” is a stroke of genius when one considers how deeply the term is entrenched in the English cultural psyche; “House of Commons”, “The Common Room”, “playing on the common” etc. This reflects the view of the library as a meeting place, as a place of interaction

Another view of libraries sees them as ‘the eyes and ears of the organisation’, a view articulated in the **Leipziger Memorandum**<sup>17</sup> issued by the APBB, a professional association for the public sector in Germany.

Just recently, I was reminded of yet a third view. In a recent presentation during the Book Fair in Frankfurt Stefan Kramer, Social Science Data Librarian at Yale University in the course of his presentation introduced the audience to the **Nancy Pearl Librarian Action Figure**<sup>18</sup> with the “Amazing push-button Shushing Action!”. The figure, a stereotype librarian in the traditional sense puts her finger to her mouth - when the button on her back is pushed – and tells you to be quiet. Now, is the Nancy Pearl persona really a traditional stereotype or does she represent a contrasting, returning pendulum view of libraries as a place of quiet respite from the digital panopticon the world is rapidly becoming - a respite where people have both space and time to reflect and think?

There is no doubt in my mind that it is a challenging, frightening yet exciting time to be a librarian. However, given this turbulence - which here I can only elude to - the question remains; would libraries or librarians really be helped by directly including them in the new name? I think not. As with the term “information”, the terms “library” and “librarian” would – for different reasons - fray the edges of the “succinct refinement” provided by the name **Association for Strategic Knowledge Professionals**. On the other hand, would libraries and librarians benefit from the association of their activities with strategic knowledge expertise and excellence? I think the answer here would be yes.

So going back to my encounter with Janice in Frankfurt, I hope I have been able to show that a more reasoned assessment of the new name has led me to support it and even to like it. The acronym “ASKPro” is, on the other hand, another story.

---

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.shef.ac.uk/infocommons/>

<sup>17</sup> See [http://www.apbb.de/memorandum\\_apbb%20engl.pdf](http://www.apbb.de/memorandum_apbb%20engl.pdf) for a version in English.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.mcphee.com/laf/> for fun but [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nancy\\_Pearl](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nancy_Pearl) for erudition.

# online consultants international

## 2. The Acronym “ASKPro”

With respect to the proposed acronym the belly still has the upper hand. The acronym “ASKPro” has come in for considerable criticism and I too have reasons for disliking it.

### 2.1. The acronym is so obviously Anglophone

As you know I have recently taken over the responsibility for SLA Germany. We are a very small group facing a big, steep hill but are encouraged by the activities of the SLA and the direction the Association is taking. However, the acronym “ASKPro” as a label for the Association makes the big, steep hill steeper. Not only does the acronym lack the buzz, compactness and universality of three letter abbreviations such as SAP, IBM, BMW, DGI etc., ASKPro clearly draws its “strength” from the fact that the acronym itself expresses the “ask-a-professional” idea to an English speaker.

It is to be expected that the Alignment Project should deliver such a result given that all the respondents were from the US, UK, Canada and Australia. That the acronym should be targeted at the bulk of the SLA’s membership is fair enough. My point is that compared to the abbreviation “SLA” the obviously Anglophone acronym “ASKPro” risks compromising the effectiveness of the Association’s desire to reach into other non-English language markets and countries.

### 2.2. The acronym has a too technical ring to it:

My second problem with the acronym is that it has a technical ring to it. It sounds like a search engine or a software, e.g. ASKPro for XP, Linux MAC etc....Or, is there an ASKHome or ASKStudent version etc... My concern here is that while the new name **Association for Strategic Knowledge Professionals** as argued previously helps position information people with respect to their IT colleagues and competitors, the acronym risks diluting or compromising this delineation.

### 2.3. Towards a solution

So what is the solution? Recommended here is that we placate the belly, engage the brain and tend toward the pragmatic. The impression I have of the criticism of the acronym is that much of it is triggered by instinct and first impressions. This is the belly rumbling. Interestingly, commentators have associations ranging from headache pills to plumbers!

However, as Steven Abrams pointed out, many options while possibly desirable are simply no longer available to us. Just as an example, I have noted one or two comments suggesting as an

# online consultants international

alternative name the **Association of Knowledge and Information Professionals** which would give us the abbreviation “AKIP”. Ignoring for the moment that in UK slang “to go for a kip” means to have a snooze, the abbreviation with the suffix .org in the form of [www.akip.org](http://www.akip.org) is already occupied by the Alaskan Independence Party!

Another alternative might be to keep the SLA three letter abbreviation and seek to connect to the “Strategic Knowledge” appellation through the tag line. This I would advise against as even in a disguised form it perpetuates the use of term “special libraries”, a phrase that respondents in the course of the Alignment Project research were adamant was no longer helpful.

I also take Rachel Kolsky’s point about the organisation TFPL<sup>19</sup> in the UK and that with determined branding the four letter abbreviation became the brand as people forgot the original meaning, namely **Task Force Pro Libra**. Here I have to confess that I had certainly forgotten what the letters stood for. And for that, at times confused the “f” and the “p” and often ended up at the **Taunton Physique Fitness & Leisure** website. This, yet another embarrassing moment in the life of this information specialist, serves as perhaps both a reminder and a way forward in terms of a solution.

The reminder is that when it comes to names and labels in the digital world, ugliness is not the enemy. The enemy is ambiguity, obscurity and above all irrelevance. Whatever acronym or abbreviation is eventually chosen it has to stand out rather than be aesthetically pleasing. With this in mind, consider the following abbreviations and acronyms of a selection of US, German, British, Australian and Asian associations for librarians and information specialists,

AASL, AGMB, AjBD, ALA, ANZIL, APBB, ASKPro, ASpB, ATLA, BIB-OPL, BIALL, BILETA  
CILIP, DGI, DVMD, GfWM, GLIG, IFLA, LIANZA, MLA, P-D-R, SCOOP, SLA, SLASA, TFPL....

Does ASKPro stand out? I am afraid, I rather think it does.

Even so, for my part the belly is still not satisfied. That being the case the brain would appreciate hearing from marketers and branding specialists. What, for instance could be done on the artistic side by an imaginative graphic designer to render **ASKPro** or **askPro** or **askpro** more palatable to a human audience.

In particular, I would welcome comments from the practitioners of the dark arts of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). How would they assess and rate the acronym “ASKPro” alongside its peers and potential competitors? Given our involvement in as well as our dependence on the digital

---

<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.tfpl.com>

# online consultants international


world, we would be wise to give serious weighting to the aesthetic “sensibilities” of machines as well as that of humans.

Pursuing the last thought, a further idea may be to reconsider what flexibility would be won by reconsidering the suffix. So for example, in the event of a positive vote for the name, I assume SLA’s intention would be to then relaunch with ASKPro.org. As alternatives however, would not ASKPro.net or even ASK.Pro.info be at least worth considering? Personally I am growing to like **ASKPro.net** or **askPro.net** or even **ask.pro.net** as it emphasises what in my mind is SLA’s greatest core strength, namely its ability to connect people and information and thereby build bridges and form networks.

I hope this is useful. Comments and criticism are of course most welcome.

Greetings from Karlsruhe

Michael

Author:		
Michael Fanning	Managing Director <b>Online Consultants International GmbH</b> Unterreut 6 D-76135 Karlsruhe	<b>t</b> +49-(0)721-92 12-909 <b>f</b> +49-(0)721-92 12-913 <b>e</b> michael.fanning@oci-gmbh.com <b>w</b> http://www.oci-gmbh.com
Copyright notice:		
This publication is available under a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 Germany licence.		Version 1.0 28th October 2009