TECHNOLOGICAL GATEKEEPERS

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Defines a gatekeeper as a person usually consulted by his colleagues for technical advice or information. Identifies such persons explaining their working and characteristics. Lists the criteria for selecting a gatekeeper along with his duties and responsibilities. The library and information specialist too can work as or along with a gatekeeper.

Scientists, industrialists, research workers and management experts go to libraries and information centres for information. They usually seek information through normal or conventional channels of information. But in the sphere of scientific research there are other channels of information apart from these normal or conventional channels. These are usually approached when vital information is not accessible easily from library or information centre. Here the information is imparted by the human resources or the technological gatekeepers which are a very important constituent of non-conventional channels. Gatekeepers are well informed and have specific and recent information in their fields.

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Definition

In the industries or companies some individuals hold key or star positions in communication network, because of the frequency with which others turn to them for technical advice or discussion. When the information gathering habits of these individuals are analyzed it is seen that they link their colleagues with outside world by attending more conferences, discussions, seminars, etc. than their colleagues do. Thus they have greater exposure to the published or unpublished literature of the outside world than their colleagues.

Thus, a 'Gatekeeper' is a person who is usually consulted by his colleagues for information; this consultation takes place as a first step in obtaining information despite the fact that other avenues are also open to the enquirer.[1]

Who are Technological Gatekeepers?

Allen [2] identified and named them 'Gatekeepers' because they open the gate to information for others. These people make extensive use of information services and have well-developed outside contacts. Thus a gatekeeper is one who gathers knowledge by himself, enjoys reading and retains information. This retained information is passed on to his colleagues in case they have any problem. Also a gatekeeper controls a strategic point of the communication channel and can decide whether a particular piece of information flowing through the channel should reach a particular user or not.

How the Gatekeeper works?

The technological gatekeeper receives information from a wide variety of sources external to his organisation and acts as an information source for his colleagues in his group. This two-step flow is more effective in transferring information than a simple direct connection from source to the user. Thus a person operating as a gatekeeper has to operate in two different networks - an external network of information sources and an internal network of domestic users to whom the required information is to be delivered.

Technological gatekeepers are different from invisible colleges [3]. Invisible colleges are concerned with the flow of information among different individuals in different institutions, in different countries and even using different languages at times. Whereas the concept of gatekeepers is by contrast concerned with the flow of infor-
mation inside an organisation. The technological
gatekeepers are also likely to be members of in-
visible colleges. In this way they form communi-
cation links both inside and outside their organi-
sation.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TECHNOLOGICAL
GATEKEEPERS

Following are some of the characteristics of
technological gatekeepers:

1) They are usually members of a group
comprising eight to fifteen people. They are active participants within a
group with considerable status and are
usually esteemed for their knowledge
and expertise by other members.

2) They are usually learned personalities
who have acquired knowledge not only
through training, education, research
and status but also strong contacts with
outside.

3) They have served for a substantial pe-
period within an organisation.

4) They are prolific contributors of infor-
mation. Also they are active in seeking
information both through formal chan-
nels like the library as well as by infor-
mal means like correspondence. They
are adept at interpreting information
and recognizing its significance for their
own and for their colleagues work.

5) They have the ability to analyse infor-
mation, absorb ideas and relay them to
the concerned researcher.

6) They are visible and of a friendly dis-
position.

CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING A TECHNO-
LOGICAL GATEKEEPER

In any organisation, a person to be designated as
a gatekeeper should satisfy the following cri-
teria:

a) Technical expertise
He should be a technical expert in the field
in which he is asked to give advice.

b) Personality
He should be pleasing, approachable, co-
operative and receptive rather than extro-
vert. He should not be very sensitive and of
transient quality.

c) Accessibility
He should serve in the organisation for long-
er periods. There is no point in having a per-
son who changes his job frequently. [4]

d) Status
He should not be at a very high level in the
organisation as at higher level there will be
fewer chances of reading and fewer oppor-
tunities for contact with colleagues.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF A TECHNOLOGICAL
GATEKEEPER

The technological gatekeeper has certain respon-
sibilities and duties to perform. Some of these
are:

- To provide information about any aspect of
his technical area or guide the enquirer to
the source best able to provide the required
information.

- To maintain a record of the technical special-
izations in his own area and of the persons/
staff responsible for these specializations.

- To ensure that all technical information
generated within the technical area is com-
municated to all the persons concerned in
the organisation.

- To provide complete, accurate, current and
up-to-date information. For this, he should
be an expert in his field, sit in appropriate
committees, attend conferences and travel
around.
To receive enquiries which he answers from his own experience and that of his colleagues. For this he should be conversant with the literature.

TECHNOLOGICAL GATEKEEPERS AND LIBRARIES/INFORMATION CENTRES

The role of a gatekeeper leads to an information system based on people and not on literature. Such people can be found in each organisation and in some cases there is a natural growth of gatekeepers. Effective gatekeeper has to be visible since a person having active role in information communication be regarded as an expert and knowledgeable by his colleagues and management. The library/information centres play an important role here as they not only provide backup service for the gatekeeper by gathering, analyzing and organising information but also use him as an aid to the memory. Can information workers too act as gatekeepers? The information workers too can be gatekeepers provided they have thorough subject knowledge and are well-versed with all kinds of literature required by scientists of their institution. An information 'gatekeeper' acts in a slightly different manner.

Some organisations have a system of circulating newly received books, journals or other reading materials in the first instance only to nominated users who represent a group of people or who share a particular subject interest. Here an information scientist is allocated the position of an information 'gatekeeper'. He might have been chosen for his subject expertise and approachability and his responsibilities include maintaining records of his colleagues’ subject interests and informing them about all pertinent information he receives. The gatekeeper in this case is the only person who keeps contact with the library or with the newly received reading materials. He acts in two ways [5] - firstly he contacts his colleagues directly and does not merely instruct the library to send the materials to the particular user. In this case the copies of materials of interest to users are supplied. Secondly he maintains his own records of useful documents on each topic. When someone faced with some problem approaches, he immediately consults his records and supplies information.

Each library/information centre will have to work out itself how these 'gatekeepers' are to be fitted into information-transfer chain. in the process of information dissemination it can be more effective to recognize the existence of gatekeepers and use them, than to broadcast all information widely [6]. If this is done, there will be a higher chance of information being transmitted, received and understood by users. The 'gatekeeper' also works by receiving queries (not reference queries) from library users which he answers usually from his own experience, or by consulting his colleagues or by going through literature.

The technological gatekeepers can be seen in a slightly different role too. They need not be information scientists but they visit library frequently and often reveal themselves to the librarian in course of time. They are aware of and use all information sources. They always enquire about the availability of recent publications and show high level of interest in the library activities often suggesting purchases. These 'gatekeepers' are observed helping others to find information. The librarians should not resent these people but should use them to their advantage. The more the number of such people in the network, the better he will satisfy the users. Also in a library or an information centre, gatekeepers don’t deprive others of service as library/information services are available to all; but, gatekeepers serve a very selected group of users.

Thus a librarian or an information specialist will be able to do his job better if he works as a or along with a 'gatekeeper' as he knows -

- the form in which a user requires information
- the quantity of information to be supplied
- how to analyze, synthesize and provide information in a readily available form.

TRAINING OF TECHNOLOGICAL GATEKEEPERS

As mentioned above, the gatekeepers are usually self taught and have no formal training. They are persons with some inborn capabilities which help them to develop and take up this work for their own satisfaction. A question arises here is whether persons can be trained to be technological gatekeepers. If they are to be trained what should be the nature of training or the training programmes for them.
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The training and education to be imparted can either form part of a person's formal training or it can be on the job training. In the already existing training programmes of our library and information schools, a paper or part of a paper can be devoted to this aspect. In the curriculum a part of the paper on 'Information Sources and Media' or "Reference Service" can be devoted to the training of technological gatekeepers. Secondly, in organisations where persons are required to work as gatekeepers, short term courses of 2-4 weeks duration can be specially arranged. These courses can be in the form of lectures, discussions and practicals.

Without formal education and training too, a person can be a gatekeeper as some people as a hobby go through the current literature and share their knowledge with others. It is some inbuilt quality by which they pass on information to others.

CONCLUSION

That the role of gatekeepers in an organisation is one of communication channels can be seen from the following examples.

Prof. T J Allen of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology had conducted a series of investigations into information needs of technologists. According to Prof. Allen [7] "An average engineer derives only 10 per cent of his information from the literature. The rest he obtains from internal and external consultants. It was found that though outside consultants were frequently used, their use did not affect performance so much as the use of inside consultants. It was clear, however, that outside information was used" and Allen further demonstrated that it came to a particular personnel (which he calls 'gatekeeper') within the organisation who suggested it to his colleagues.

In other example, B Yates of Pilkington Group Technical Communication Centre describes how a system involving technological gatekeepers operates in his organisation. Yates claims his organisation to be the first to try and formalize the concept of "Technological Gatekeeper" and has adopted the term 'contact' [8]. To begin with a number of contacts in specific technical areas were selected. The organisation obtains, indexes, stores and retrieves relevant information on a personal basis (with particular emphasis on dissemination to the contacts), produces bulletins and provides answers to queries. The information officers of the organisation had to get in touch with assigned contacts (knowing their particular areas of work) and detail their enquiry. The contact would in turn provide information immediately or refer the enquirer to literature or to a subject specialist as the case may be.

From the above we see that in western countries the gatekeepers have already been working effectively. In India, too, we see people working as gatekeepers. It is seen that in almost all organisations, one or may be more persons are always seen playing the role of a gatekeeper even if nobody recognizes them or their services. In some cases they may be invisible, they keep on helping others whether their services are recognized or not. These persons work as gatekeepers as they are interested in such work. Their hobby is to go through current literature and acquaint others who are interested and share their knowledge. They feel delighted in doing this work. It may be some inbuilt quality or something that comes to them naturally whereby they pass on information to others. It is also possible to 'grow' gatekeepers as there are people who have contacts both with literature and subject specialists.

REFERENCES