Face of the Month: Ad Notten

UNU-MERIT has its own library with an extensive collection of books on innovation and technological change. However, without our information specialist Ad Notten, we would all be lost. This month we asked Ad to tell us about his work and how information management and provision has changed over the years. Since Ad is also an (undercover) PhD Researcher, we asked him to talk about the topic of his PhD too.

* You're our information specialist - what are your main tasks?

The main task is the information provision to the researchers and students at UNU-MERIT, and other, third party, users of our library. Further, bibliographic support for our researchers, especially for project purposes is another of the tasks as well as the maintenance of a special collection specific to the area UNU-MERIT is researching. In recent years I have also been able to participate in research projects with a (partial) focus on bibliometric data and information science/studies related issues.

* You have been at UNU-INTECH/UNU-MERIT for a considerable amount of time- how do you find the organization has changed over the years?

The organization has grown considerably, in terms of staff as well as of research. For the library this has been a very positive development. However it has retained a "free spirit".

* How about the job of a librarian - how has the field changed over time?

Although information itself has not changed, the media containing it have diversified immensely. As such, information provision has changed in terms of media offerings of the libraries. As you can see with the University of Maastricht library, the original collection has taken a back-seat to the digital content that is being offered. So in effect there is an emphasis on an expanded digital collection backed up by a larger computer/digital infrastructure. A research library such as the one we have at UNU-MERIT follows this trend although less pronounced. However, I think that being a librarian has in essence not changed drastically; users are still looking for the same information, be it in different media, and the librarian's role is still the same guiding one.

* Where do you see the field heading given the increasing importance of electronic media, open source and so forth?

Adding to the above, personally I think that digital content and especially Open Access are a great development and I hope the latter will change academic publishing routines and will hopefully break the stranglehold the big journal publishers have on the academic community/libraries/etc.

* You recently did a masters in the UK- what was it on? Do you find that information management is dealt with differently in the UK to the Netherlands?

The Masters was titled "Management of Library and Information Services" and unsurprisingly this was what it was about. I managed to focus further on Knowledge Management, however, my thesis was about academic publishing, media and career/management decisions.

In the Netherlands, and the rest of Europe perhaps, information studies as an academic discipline does not have a prominent standing. In the Anglophone countries this is totally different.
Finally, you have recently been embarking on a PhD – please tell us a bit about your topic.

My PhD is about tacit knowledge retention in knowledge intensive environments. Knowledge retention, be it internal or external, is of great importance to organizations. Without the retention of knowledge one can speak of capital destruction through knowledge loss. Although codified knowledge, with some care, can be retained in knowledge repositories of various forms, retaining tacit knowledge is not as straightforward. The repositories of tacit knowledge are interpersonal networks, with tacit knowledge possibly representing a large part of the combined amount of knowledge flowing within communities.

These social networks are of course less predictable in behaviour than repositories of codified knowledge. It is nevertheless possible to identify within these networks, certain roles, concepts and processes which can be investigated in order to map the characteristics of tacit knowledge retention within organizations and interpersonal networks. An important influencing factor with respect to tacit knowledge retention is actor mobility (employee mobility).

The current thinking rests on the assumption that proximity in terms of location dictates the flow of knowledge and as such also ultimately the retention of tacit knowledge. Particularly interesting to investigate is whether (inter-)personal networks are more important to the retention of knowledge than institutional networks. Departing from the above I hope that an inference can ultimately be made as to whether actor mobility has a significant detrimental effect on institution building and continuity.