Concept and Application of Knowledge Management in the 21st Century Libraries: A practical approach

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Abstract

Purpose: Knowledge management practices, needs and usefulness in libraries that are intending to be compliant with this information age is in the real sense not a luxury, hence, the motivation for this paper.

Design/Approach: This researchers' opinion paper focuses on the concept of knowledge management and its general application in this information world. It explores the usefulness of knowledge management and its practical application to librarianship in particular. The challenges faced by knowledge workers in modern libraries were also discussed.

Findings: The regular organization of relevant and up-to-date materials is very vital. The ability of patrons to access useful materials on time regardless of their location is also of utmost concern, furthermore, for the knowledge workers in a library setting which refers to the librarians and information professionals cross training and mentoring techniques are also much needed in order to get the best of everyone.

Implications: An array of knowledge services that could be additionally rendered to patrons are discussed, and to us in the librarianship profession. Indeed, all of these and more that are explored in this paper are positive ways of managing knowledge within the libraries.

Originality/Value: Recommendations were made, among which is the need to make conditions flexible for librarians to develop their expertise more widely, and also aspire to different roles of a more strategic and policy-making nature.

Key words: Knowledge Management, 21st Century Libraries, Information age, knowledge workers

Introduction

Knowledge management practices are becoming increasingly important to many organizations. Well aware that having an effective knowledge management system in place does not only protect revenues, it may also improve retention, increase productivity, and promote innovation. Most organizations are increasingly becoming aware that when they leverage their knowledge, they can sustain their long-term competitive advantages. The emergence of the information age that is also commonly known as the computer age marks a period in history when information became easily accessible through publications and likewise through the manipulation of information by electronic gadgets such as computer networks, cell phones, digital music, ipads, digital cameras, internet facilities, etc. This technological advancement enhanced free transfer and flow of information in businesses and organizations, thus leading to information explosion. Many organizations then needed to devise various means of managing the available information in manners that will be valuable to them. Hence, the adoption of knowledge management practices in organizations. Before now, libraries have been associated with a routine nature that compels its librarian to sit on the circulation desk, and does not more than charging and discharging of semi-obsolete materials that has been acquired by the management of that particular library since its inception. These types of libraries are basically traditional, and do not find a place in the 21st century.

The 21st Century Libraries (Modern Libraries)

The term "21st century libraries" as used in this context refers to any type of library (be it Academic, School, Public, or Private) that is willing to be compliant with the moving trend of information technology. They are libraries which aspire to possess the characteristics of the present as contrasted with any other time. 21st century libraries which are also referred to as Modern libraries in this paper are applied to those libraries which its collections conform to the present age. Hence, they are up-to-

date libraries. (Collins, 2002, modified).Unlike the library services of the past that mainly focused on distributing books and research materials and a one-sided provision of information and resources, the modern library creates a space where patrons engage with information and information services - reflect on it, have conversations about it, and develop new ideas, ask questions, and get beneficial opportunities as a result of it.

Libraries are the promoters of civilization, and centers for lifelong learning. They have to evolve, and look into the future, not only the past. The libraries of today are quite different from the ones we may have known as children, this is so because recent years have brought incredible changes in how we deliver library services, 21st century libraries are shaping the way we learn things and enjoy books in the digital age. They also offer access to books in every possible form and format.

Concept of Knowledge Management

In order to explain the concept of knowledge management, an understanding of the word knowledge is required. Amazingly, this concept has been discussed by philosophers for many years without a complete resolution. It has been characterized by residing in people's minds rather than in any stored form, it is also seen as being a combination of information, context, and experience, or as a high value form of information that is applied to decisions and actions Taylor and Joudrey, (2009). Now, defining knowledge management is much more complex, the reason is not far-fetched. It is complex because it means different things to different organizations, and each organization has chosen to adopt it as it relates to their progress. Nevertheless, we would examine a number of working definitions of both knowledge and knowledge management that have been given by various scholars, after which we would also contribute to knowledge by defining it as it relates to modern libraries.

According to Davenport and Prusak (2008), "Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experience and information. It originates and is applied in the mind of the knower. In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents and repositories but also in organizational routines,

processes, practices and norms." While data and information are in a sense bound objects, knowledge is much more a process, or an ability to understand and to share understanding.

Knowledge management according to Alan, (2012) is the systematic management of an organization's knowledge assets for the purpose of creating value and meeting tactical & strategic requirements; it consists of the initiatives, processes, strategies, and systems that sustain and enhance the storage, assessment, sharing, refinement, and creation of knowledge. Skyrme, (2011) defined Knowledge Management as the explicit and systematic management of vital knowledge- and its associated processes of creation, organization, diffusion, use and exploitation - in pursuit of business objectives.

In the 90s, some scholars (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Pasternack and Viscio 1998; Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999; Ruggles and Holtshouse, 1999) defined the phrase as the process of applying a systematic approach to the capture, structuring, management, and dissemination of knowledge throughout an organization to work faster, reuse best practices, and reduce costly rework from project to project.

It was stated by Stewart, (2000) that the best way to retain valuable knowledge in organizations is to identify intellectual assets and then ensure legacy materials are produced and subsequently stored in such a way as to make their future retrieval and reuse as easy as possible. According to Nickols (2000), "the basic aim of knowledge management is to leverage knowledge to an organization's advantage.

For the purpose of this paper, knowledge management is defined as the ability to ensure that library management maximizes the value of their information and knowledge assets, and encourage their librarians and information professionals to use their creativity and skills better, in the aim to achieve improved patronage and greater innovations in the libraries. This will even help in transforming more of our traditional libraries to modern ones, thereby, making them to be more efficient in knowledge sharing.

Application of Knowledge Management to 21st Century libraries

Going by our adopted definition of knowledge management, libraries are service organizations by nature, their value should not be measured by the number of items they hold, but rather by the

number of successful user transactions, these transactions are facilitated by the librarians, and they are the ones that deliver the service, it is therefore reasonable to invest in the internal before we go to great lengths of publicizing our library services externally. Also, the library management should consider bringing knowledge sharing into their formal approach to performance management, so that people are rewarded for sharing information freely, otherwise, it might be hard to "sell" knowledge management to your librarians. After all, you're asking them to share their hard-won knowledge and experience, the very things that make them valuable to the library.

In other words, management of libraries should make knowledge sharing part of the company culture, and something that everyone does. This will help make librarians and information professionals feel more comfortable about getting involved. There are several practical ways in which knowledge could be managed in libraries; a number of them would be discussed:

Shadowing is a major way of getting raw information in many organizations, the libraries inclusive, it means to secretly or discreetly track or follow workers, keeping them under surveillance. CCTV cameras are usually adopted for this purpose, and as much as possible, workers should be sidelined as to information about the effectiveness of the cameras. By so doing, so much of information would be gathered, and the use and value of this information should be properly and maturely handled by the authorities.

Mentoring is another practical way of managing knowledge in libraries; this can be achieved by pairing experienced librarians with new or less experienced ones. The first part of the process is to make sure that the overall work environment is one that is supportive, open and non-threatening. They need to be re-assured that making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process, and that their confidence in their abilities will improve with their experience. Mentors can also help the newcomers become a part of the culture of the organization by explaining traditions and warning against difficult situations and politics. The basis is that the knowledge a mentor has gained through experience be passed on to the mentees, it cannot be paid back to the organization, rather the debt is paid when they bring others along, the most important part of being a leader in the final

analysis would be the fact that you have prepared someone else to take your place.

Cross-training of librarians and information professionals is also a major one, Libraries by their very nature are labour-intensive organizations; while we depend upon our resources, it is more important to have librarians and information professionals that are able to perform the most essential functions of matching the information resources to the needs of the patrons. This can be achieved by investing a tremendous amount of effort into training, the question that often arise is, how can this be accomplished with the limited resources that libraries have at their disposal? One of the best solutions is to take advantage of the talents and knowledge that are possessed by each librarian, discover them, explore them, and make them useful for the libraries.

Encourage knowledge skills: It is very interesting to note that most librarians and information professionals possess commendable skills in various information related services. For some, it is indexing or abstracting services, for some, it is reference services, or cloud computing services, for others, it may be editing of research work, translation services, Statistical data analysis services, e-mail and internet services, compilation of bibliography and lots more. All of these services should be encouraged and publicized by the library management so that it could be additionally rendered to patrons, apart from the normal routine services they usually get at the libraries. This would not only widen the scope of library patrons, it would also continually gear librarians to work and improve their knowledge skills. Cross-training sessions should be regularly organized among the librarians, so that the knowledge that each of them has acquired or is talented with could be constantly shared.

Challenges faced by knowledge workers in Modern Libraries

Application of knowledge management practices in Modern libraries is not expected to be hitch-free. As it is with many other technology-based practices, it is envisaged to have its own challenges. The major one is **Reluctance to ideas**: The reluctance that many people (including librarians) have about practicing knowledge management stems from the belief that there is nothing that they can learn from their colleagues, or that their colleagues can learn from them. This is very wrong, regardless

of the position that we hold in the library or elsewhere, we all can benefit from each other's perspectives and techniques if we keep an open mind.

Another challenge however, is in the area of **Funding**: Adequate funds are not being allocated to staff development in libraries by the management, lack of funds to continually attend conferences, workshops and seminars, some of which may be intra-national, or even international. Many librarians and information professionals may not be able to adequately find the financial resources to attend in these times of dwindling budgets. Another challenge is **inadequate staffing**: this has particularly compounded the issue of funding, because there are not enough librarians available to send some to workshops or conferences and have others cover their assigned tasks. **Empowerment complex** is also a major one: Information professionals in the modern libraries are meant to be adequately empowered; this doesn't mean that the management dumps all of the bulk work on them, but rather, the delegation of a fraction of authority and decision-making power. Unfortunately, it is not the case, most of these libraries are single-handedly managed by the management, and very rarely are the views of these librarians been considered before making decisions. **Inadequate form of Motivation** is another major challenge: information professionals are not being given enough form of motivation, this unfortunately slows down the rate of performance, as motivation usually reflects in human behaviour.

Conclusion

It is no more a current news that knowledge is every organization's largest asset, the libraries inclusive. It would be very unwise, and would do the libraries no good if the information professionals perceive knowledge management as being just another madness or idiosyncrasy. Therefore, library and Information Science departments in various institutions of learning are to be responsible for equipping their graduates with the required and needed knowledge management skills. Although, the present Library and information science curriculum has already included some core elements of knowledge, but there is also a need to equip graduates with competencies in knowledge management applications in libraries of nowadays.

Information technology and systems can provide effective support in implementing knowledge management. Librarians should work together with IT professionals and others to develop the appropriate knowledge management systems.

Recommendations

Adoption of knowledge management practices in the libraries of nowadays is not a luxury. In the actual sense, it is as necessary as the air we breathe. In other words, its pros and cons should be explored, addressed, and given a lifelong solution. Our product in libraries is service; our goal is excellent delivery of that service.

If librarians and information professionals are to exhibit more prominent and relevant roles in knowledge management, there is need for them to develop their expertise more widely, and also aspire for different roles of a more strategic and policy-making nature. These entail learning different information and knowledge skills and consciously exposing themselves to new ways of thinking, in recognition that the practice of knowledge management has much to offer to the management of libraries and for advancement of the information professionals, ultimately, this is what will determine the overall success of the library.

For any library to succeed in implementing knowledge management, it will require a **strong leadership and vision** from the top administration, which can influence the organization's knowledge sharing efforts in a positive way. The most important thing about being an administrator is that they must remember that they are working with people, who are usually different from each other, and have different ways of dealing with the same situation. The best way to work successfully with them is to handle them the way you yourself would like to be handled. This applies to the library management; **Funds** should be made available for training and retraining of the librarians, in the quest for equipping human resources in order to have an effective knowledge management in place: knowledge that is not acquired cannot be transferred.

Also, the issue of **Empowerment** needs to be addressed: In order for librarians to be part of knowledge management practices in the libraries, they should be able to visualize what library services should be in the future. They can only have this vision if they are participants in shaping the library's goals and if they have a

part in developing the plans that are necessary to bring the library to these new levels. Empowerment means a sharing of the power; the library management, if a good leader should always be willing to do this; leadership means getting things done through people, and this is very important if we are willing to involve them in knowledge management. In conclusion, the management should occasionally encourage the information professionals as a form of **Motivation**. It may not necessarily be a financial type of motivation; rather, it may take the form of awards (rewarding competencies and good performance). Let them always have a feeling that their performance matters: people who feel capable and competent in performing their jobs will be highly motivated to continue to perform very well, a good management should be aware of the potential benefits of praise and positive feedback. **Staff Evaluation** may also be done on annual basis; this could be achieved by designing evaluation forms to be filled by patrons at the end of each year. Colleagues may also take part in the evaluation process, and the information should be gathered in a confidential mode. After the evaluation forms have been processed, the information gathered may then be pasted openly for everyone to assess his or her praises and shortcomings, this will allow them to improve on their shortcomings in the following year. All these are ways to inspire and gear up the librarians to work in order to achieve this course of managing knowledge in the libraries. In this 21st century knowledge age, libraries should not take a back seat in the management of knowledge. Instead, armed with our professional knowledge and expertise, we should always remain in the front seat.

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