

Concepts of Knowledge Management among Library & Information Science Professionals

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify, collect and critically review the research literature on the concepts of Knowledge Management (KM) among Library & Information Science (LIS) professionals. The present study is based on the review of published work in the field of KM and librarianship. It has been observed that the knowledge which is embedded in people (their skill and expertise) as well as knowledge of working processes of libraries (explicit knowledge) recognized as the important sources of knowledge within libraries. Skills of LIS professionals in librarianship and information management can be very beneficial to KM, but these are not sufficient and there is a need to acquire additional competencies in the fields of communication, human resource management, change management, project management. Based on the extensive review of literature, this study provides a theoretical foundation for further research to investigate the problems and prospects of implementing KM in libraries.

KeyTerms: Knowledge Management, Library & Information Science, Emerald, Science Direct, LISTA, DOAJ, Google Scholar, J-Store.

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INTRODUCTION

In the age of the globalization and increased worldwide competition, many organizations are looking for new ways to gain competitive advantage. In doing this, these organizations are trying to use a variety of organizational resources. Today, knowledge, as an intangible asset, has taken precedence over traditional organizational resources such as capital and labour. Knowledge in organization resides within individuals as well as working processes, which is more specifically known as tacit and explicit knowledge respectively. KM as an emerging discipline focuses on the various management processes that facilitate finding, identifying, capturing, creating, storing, sustaining, applying, sharing and renewing knowledge to improve an organization's performance.

The advent of the internet and related technological developments has transformed the nature of library and information services. In the midst of these changes, KM has emerged as a further significant influence on library practice. Libraries embrace vast amounts of knowledge in various areas and its management is considered important for providing quality information services, making effective decisions, improving their

overall performance and becoming more relevant to their parent organizations. However, practices of KM seem uncommon among LIS professionals as reflected within LIS literature. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the concepts of KM prevail among LIS professionals.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine the concepts of knowledge and KM.
- To determine the scope of KM in LIS profession.
- To examine the opportunities and threats for LIS professionals as emerged from the origin of KM.
- To identify the requirement of competencies among LIS professionals for their involvement in KM practice.

METHODOLOGY

Since the basic purpose of the present study is to examine the concepts of KM among LIS professionals, literature survey method was found suitable. 51 articles related to KM and librarianship were identified from various databases, including Web of Science, Emerald, Science Direct, Library, Information

Science and Technology Abstract (LISTA), Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Google Scholar and J-Store, using the combination of keywords knowledge management and libraries. The literature review is narrow in the sense that only studies using these keywords were included. The paper is organized into five sections. The first section is devoted to the concept of knowledge. The second describes the concepts of KM and its relationship with librarianship and information management. The third examines the scope of KM in the LIS profession. The fourth discusses the opportunities and threats emerged from the origin of KM. In the final section, a discussion on the requirements of competencies for LIS professionals is presented.

Concept of Knowledge

Knowledge is defined as justified personal belief that increases an individual's capability to take effective action¹. Knowledge in an organization may be distinguished either as explicit or tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is defined as formal and systematic knowledge, which can be expressed in words or numbers and can be documented or stored in databases as electronic records. Examples might include a telephone directory, an instruction manual or a report of research findings. While tacit knowledge is the subjective and experience based knowledge difficult to articulate or write down¹. It can be shared between people through discussion, stories and personal interactions. It includes skills, experiences, insight, intuition and judgment.

In libraries, explicit knowledge is either generated within the organization, such as reports, memos guidelines, theses, minutes of meetings, etc. or acquired from external sources, including books, journal articles databases, external reports, government information, etc. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, resides in senior and experienced employees with a sound knowledge of work procedures, rules and regulations, etc and the unarticulated knowledge contained in the librarians themselves². Both types of knowledge (explicit and tacit knowledge) is considered as the key knowledge sources of a library which should be managed properly³.

Concept of Knowledge Management

Although the concept of KM emerged from the business sector, its practices are now being applied in the domain of non-profit and public sector organizations including academic institutions. Increasingly, library practitioners are acknowledging the importance of KM for libraries. In response to the growing interest of KM among the LIS community, a KM section was created by International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) as a separate unit in December 2003⁴. Since its inception, LIS professionals have expressed a need for a deeper understanding of KM's many dimensions and its relevance throughout the library and information environment.

According to working definition of IFLA, KM is 'a process of creating (generating, capturing), storing (preserving, organizing, integrating), sharing (communicating), applying (implementing), and reusing (transforming) organisational knowledge to enable an organisation to achieve its goals and objectives⁵. Further, IFLA clarifies that the term knowledge is not limited to published information; it also covers tacit knowledge (expertise), implicit knowledge, explicit knowledge, and procedural knowledge.

There is an ongoing debate among the LIS community on whether

KM is a completely new discipline or simply re-branding of librarianship or Information Management (IM). Librarianship is a discipline which deals with the collection, organization and dissemination of recorded or explicit knowledge⁶ which, according to Townley⁷ has been the primary focus of libraries. They have also developed and applied new principles and techniques in reference, cataloguing and other library services to encourage the creation and use of knowledge⁸. According to Sarrafzadeh⁹ librarians operate as intermediaries between people who have knowledge and those who need to know. There seems a considerable overlapping of the tools, terminology and techniques used in librarianship, IM and KM as emerged from the review of literature. This overlaps include in the use of tools (databases, internets, collaborative tools, etc.) and concepts (information audit vs knowledge audit, information mapping vs knowledge mapping, etc.)^{10,11,12}. Thus, from this point of view, KM can not be considered different from librarianship and IM.

There is also a strong view expressed within the LIS literature that KM is a distinct field from both librarianship and IM, because the focus of KM is on managing tacit knowledge which embedded in employees in the form of their experience, know how, insight and expertise. According to Owen¹³ the focus of IM is on information as an object and on explicit and factual information which is managed through the support of IT systems to facilitate the internal processes and ensures the quality of business operations. While the focus of KM is on knowledge as a concept and on tacit knowledge embodied in employees and in the organization as a whole to facilitate knowledge-rich relations and to ensure ongoing development and innovation. The difference between KM and IM in the context of libraries was explained by Broadbent¹⁴, who describes KM in libraries as not about managing or organizing books or journals, searching the Internet for clients or arranging for the circulation materials, but rather these activities may be considered as parts of the KM spectrum and processes. Due to the increased focus of KM on people and their expertise, some researchers highlight the importance of creating social knowledge networks such as online forums, discussion groups and communities of practice for sharing of knowledge^{15,16}. But according to Kebedese¹⁷ these tools and practices are not much in practice among LIS professionals and they are reluctant to use them in their profession.

In spite of different opinions and perceptions of LIS community towards KM, there appears a widespread recognition within the LIS literature that KM is relevant to the interests of the LIS profession. Most authors consider KM from more positive viewpoints and call for full involvement of LIS professionals in KM^{18,19,20,21}.

Scope of KM in the LIS Profession

Mainstream KM literature indicates that the application of KM contributes to the improvement in organizational performance, economic success in the market place, organizational creativity, operational effectiveness, quality of products and services and economic sustainability^{22,23,24}. While, the value of KM in the LIS profession has been recognized as:

- Survival factor for libraries to overcome the challenges library professionals are facing in the changing and competitive environment²⁵.

- Solution for the improvement of future prospects of libraries²⁶.
- Method for improving knowledge-based services for internal and external users through creating an organizational culture of sharing knowledge and expertise within the library²⁷.
- Solution for the development and application of the organizational knowledge to improve library operations and services²⁸.
- Means for the transformation of library into a more efficient and knowledge sharing Organization²⁹.

There is a group of scholars who strongly argue that librarians, on the basis of their skills of information handling, can apply and incorporate KM practice in several areas of an academic library including administrative and support services, technical services (cataloguing, classification, indexing, etc.), reference and information services, knowledge resource management, resource sharing and networking, information technology development and application^{30,31,32,33,34}. Gandhi¹² explains the early efforts of reference librarians in capturing tacit knowledge through old information tools like card-files of frequently asked questions. While these traditional practices are in many cases continue to be important, but they are no longer enough to meet the changing KM needs of libraries. Recent development in Web 2.0 technologies has provided an excellent platform to meet this need. Increasingly, librarians are using blogs, wikis and other Web 2.0 applications for knowledge sharing purposes^{35,36,37}.

Opportunities and Threats for LIS Professionals

There is strong view within LIS literature that KM expands the horizon of LIS and offers a number of opportunities for LIS professionals. An increasing number of job opportunities with new job titles and positions have emerged from KM. Ferguson³⁸ found some positions for LIS professionals in KM environment from the 'sample job description' compiled by Bishop³⁹ which include competitive intelligence leader, knowledge and information manager, intranet content manager and knowledge coordinator. Malhan⁴⁰ argue that the new roles of knowledge professionals in knowledge-intensive organization are more or less the same as the current job titles and activities of librarians and other information professionals. These new roles and functions are: knowledge engineer, knowledge editor, knowledge analysts, knowledge navigator, knowledge gatekeeper, knowledge brokers, and knowledge asset managers. But, there is no evidence within LIS literature that librarians are well placed to take advantage of this opportunity to contribute to the organizational success; instead graduates of business schools, particularly those with an information systems background, are politically well placed to play significant KM roles²². The findings of LIC/TFPL research indicate the importance of IM skills in a KM environment, but people employing these skills in a knowledge environment do not necessarily come from the LIS profession⁴¹. A Canadian study by Ajiferuke³ looked at the role of LIS professionals who are members of the Special Libraries Association. More than eighty percent of those working in companies that are engaged in KM activities are involved in KM initiatives. More than half of these consider themselves as key members of the team; although very few are in leadership roles.

The opportunities emerged from the emergence of KM has also been seen as challenge for the LIS professionals. The challenges for the LIS professionals lie in applying competencies used in managing information to the broader picture of managing knowledge³⁹. Sarrafzadeh²⁵, if LIS professionals remain reluctant to gain new skills, they will become irrelevant to their organization and will probably lose out in competition for employment to people from other fields. The most often mentioned challenges to the successful application of KM in libraries are: lack of sufficient skills and competencies, reluctance of library professionals to accept the change, misunderstanding of KM concepts, lack of knowledge sharing culture, lack of incentives or rewards for innovation and sharing of knowledge, lack of top management commitment, lack of collaboration and lack of resources (financial, technological and human)^{42,43,44,45}.

Knowledge Management Competencies Required Among LIS Professionals

There is widespread recognition within LIS literature that LIS professionals are lacking adequate exposure and knowledge of the essence of KM and thus find it difficult to actively contribute in any meaningful way to the ongoing debate as well as to the advancement of KM. They are facing difficulty to understand the key concepts and the distinct dimensions of KM. They, by and large, lack the necessary expertise to engage in exploring and practicing KM^{17,9}. Since the focus of KM is more on human as well as organizational issues, different types of skills and competencies are needed for library practitioners to work in KM environment.

Some authors have identified the requirement of competencies among LIS professionals for their involvement in KM practice. Investigating the requirement of KM skills for effective integration and use of internal knowledge, Abell¹⁸ observed that LIS sector needs to develop a range of interpersonal and business skills in its staff to add value to a knowledge-based environment. Koenig⁴⁶ highlights the importance of both LIS traditional skills in the information environment with skills in indexing, cataloguing, authority control and database management for the organization and structuring of information and knowledge as well as additional skills in the business environment with the managerial, leadership and interpersonal skills for leveraging intellectual assets throughout an organization, fostering innovation and change and developing organizational culture of sharing knowledge. Rooi⁴⁷ argue that librarians have the opportunity to play an important role in KM on the basis of their training and experience developed and used for many years. However, they need to extend and renew these skills and link it with the processes and core operations of the business in order to be successful in KM practice. Morris⁴⁸ also points out that LIS professionals have already possess the essential theoretical and practical skills to work with KM. They have opportunities to use these skills in creative and imaginative ways to influence information strategies at boardroom level and corporate decision making, but they have to gain other skills related to management, business, information and communication technology to take advantage of the emerging roles in the knowledge economy.

Researchers have investigated the requirement of competencies for LIS professionals to involve in KM practice^{49,50,51,3}. Based on the findings, they proposed several types of competencies for the successful application of KM practice in libraries, which may be



grouped into the following broad categories:

- People-centred skills (communication, facilitation, coaching, mentoring, networking, negotiating, consensus building and team working skills).
- Skills associated with the management of organization as a whole (cultural, leadership, strategic and restructuring skills).
- Information processing and management skills (developing knowledge taxonomies, organizing knowledge resources on Websites and portals and understanding of information and knowledge need of users).
- Skills related the use and application of IT.

FINDINGS

- The concept of KM was emerged in business sector, now it is being used in public sector organizations including academic institutions and their libraries.
- Libraries are having explicit as well as tacit knowledge embedded in working processes and experienced employees.
- Management of knowledge helps an organization to improve the quality of services.
- The perceptions of KM among LIS professionals are varied and they mostly view KM as the management of recorded knowledge, rather sharing and using tacit knowledge embedded in employees.
- LIS professionals have positive attitudes towards the application of KM in libraries and see it as a best method of improving library functions and services.
- The skills of LIS professionals in indexing, cataloguing, authority control and database management are considered relevant for KM, but they need some additional skills in the business environment with the managerial, leadership and interpersonal skills.
- KM offers potential opportunities for LIS professionals from their involvement in KM including personal career development and enhancement of the position and status within their parent organizations. However, if LIS professionals remain reluctant to change their mindset and gain new skill, they will become irrelevant to their organization and will probably lose out people from other fields in the competition for employment.

CONCLUSION

Though the concept of KM emerged in business sector, but its practices have now been used in the domain of non-profit and public sector organizations, including academic institutions and libraries. Recently, LIS professionals have started to acknowledge the importance of KM. The commonly-held view is that a library is a knowledge-based organization where the organization and maintenance of recorded knowledge is a practice as old as civilization itself.

In spite of having narrow perceptions towards KM, there is a developing interest in KM among LIS community. This conclusion may be drawn on the basis of three major sets of perceptions emerged from the review of literature. First, that LIS

community can and should enter into KM roles through the application of their traditional skills related to IM. Second, that there are potential benefits for LIS professionals from the involvement in KM including personal career development and enhancement of the position and status of LIS professionals within their parent organizations. Finally, that KM offers potential benefits for the development of libraries. However, the success of KM initiatives requires additional skills and competencies among LIS professionals which they are lacking. They must gain organizational political understanding, understanding of business practices and leadership skills for their involvement in KM.

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