

Knowledge Management in Libraries

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Abstract

The new knowledge economy has led to significant changes in the management of various types of organizations in our society, including libraries and information services and in the management of the resources with which they deal. This article approaches the process of knowledge management which can help libraries to better adapt to the new requirements of the digital age and meet users' needs. It also presents results of recent researches on the theme of knowledge management conducted in Romania and abroad at the level of the professionals in the library and information science field, but also examples of projects through which this process has been implemented in the practice of libraries.

Keywords: knowledge management, libraries, knowledge management projects, Romania

The digital age and the increasing volume of information available today calls for new strategies in the libraries through which the services they provide meet better users' needs and access to knowledge is improved.

In recent years, under continuous change and competition between organizations in each field, knowledge management has proven to be a process that supports organizations to achieve their goals and also success and performance.

Y. Malhotra puts knowledge management in the context of environmental changes that bring organizations to the need to find ways to survive and increase competence. In his definition, he considers that knowledge management refers to the organizational processes which are based on the combination of information technology and human creativity. “Knowledge management caters to the critical issues of organizational adaptation, survival, and competence in the face of increasingly discontinuous environmental change... Essentially, it embodies organizational processes that seek synergistic combination of data and information processing capacity of information technologies, and the creative and innovative capacity of human beings.” (1)

The transformation of intangible assets in enduring value is the approach which E. Knapp has in what concerns knowledge management. Knowledge management is “the art of transforming information and intellectual assets into enduring value for an organization’s clients and its people.” (2) P. Murray is the one that points out another important element within knowledge management, namely that human resources in an organization, regardless of hierarchical level, must work to improve their skills as a whole. “Knowledge management is a strategy that turns an organization’s intellectual assets – both recorded information and the talents of its members – into greater productivity, new value, and increased competitiveness. It teaches corporations, from managers to employees, how to produce and optimize skills as a collective entity”. (3)

As a definition, we consider that knowledge management is a process aimed at creating, identifying, sharing and using knowledge at the level of an organization.

In libraries, knowledge management aims primarily to provide good quality information services and tailored to each user’s needs in order to improve knowledge communication, application and generation. Knowledge management covers activities such as collecting new materials, developing collections on specific topics, capturing knowledge from projects, gray literature, case studies, developing expert databases, etc.

The importance of knowledge management was quickly understood by the managers of the organizations in the business sector and its adoption in the activity of many such structures took place quite rapidly in contrast to organizations such as libraries where the pervasion of the notion of knowledge management and its implementation were more difficult and in this way they entered the attention of libraries and information services not so many years ago.

Despite all these, at the level of certain types of libraries such as the academic medical libraries, the activities they have always supported in

laboratories, classrooms and hospitals include elements of knowledge management such as knowledge codification, communication, etc. E. H. Schnell, S. M. Kroll and T. J. Cain (4) consider that the mission itself of academic medical libraries which have an active role in research, teaching, but also in clinical care refers exactly to the essential processes of knowledge management i.e. creating, sharing and applying knowledge.

H. W. Lee (5) considers that the most important mission of libraries in this century is to expand access to knowledge for their users and academic libraries in particular should act as learning and knowledge centers and develop knowledge management systems.

The changes in the economy, the development of information and communication technologies, the transformation of traditional libraries into digital libraries etc. are issues that offer all categories of libraries and information services great opportunities to expand their role in the process of knowledge transfer, in the knowledge system and infrastructure. Thus, it has become clear that knowledge management is a key element for these organizations too and the need to implement this process in the activity of libraries has been gradually understood by more and more professionals in the field.

As a result of the importance knowledge management has for the library and information science field, within the activity and concerns of major professional associations it has been given its rightful place by creating special sections at the beginning of the years 2000. We can give here as an example IFLA which created a section called *Knowledge Management*. At the IFLA conferences from last years there have been many debates on this subject, there were formulated a series of definitions and also solutions for implementing knowledge management in the activity of libraries and information services. There were presented various knowledge management projects undertaken in different libraries and also the results of studies conducted among specialists in these structures on their perception of this new discipline.

Despite this, experts haven't yet agreed on the relation between knowledge management and the library and information science field, and the understanding of notions such as knowledge, knowledge management and other aspects of this process among professionals in libraries is not uniform and there are numerous points of view on knowledge management and its implementation in the activity of these organizations.

In Romania, in the context of transition towards a knowledge society, starting with 2003 we have examined the possibility of implementing knowledge management in libraries. In this sense we undertook in 2004 and in 2006 researches at the level of some Romanian

libraries on the theme of knowledge management and the organizational culture in these institutions.

The study from 2004 (6), the first ever study in Romania on the theme of knowledge management in the library and information science field, tried to find out if there was a favourable climate for effective knowledge management. The study was undertaken in four Romanian libraries and showed that 81% of the respondents considered knowledge management as a process of creating, organizing, sharing and using organizational knowledge to enable an organization to achieve its objectives. In what concerns the knowledge and skills they would like to get and which they considered they should get in order to carry out their work effectively in the future, the participants in this survey indicated managerial knowledge and skills: planning, organization, coordination, communication and negotiation skills and computer skills: operating a PC, operating with databases, editing, image processing, information retrieval skills. The survey also indicated that most of them were aware that sharing knowledge is a basic element of this discipline and their responses revealed their willingness to share knowledge: 77% of the participants in the study would share their experience and professional knowledge with other colleagues because is beneficial for the organization, 58% because it is beneficial for their own development. The results showed that the culture of knowledge sharing amongst the specialists in the organizations surveyed didn't yet exist but enough elements were identified that could support the creation of such a culture in the future. Most of the participants in the study considered the implementation of a knowledge management strategy by their organizations as necessary and beneficial. A first step in adopting this new managerial concept was the fact that the library specialists were familiar with this new process, having a fairly good perception of what knowledge management represents, and that they were open to the idea of knowledge sharing.

The second study, the one from 2006 (7), analyzed the elements that characterize the organizational culture in Romanian large academic libraries. The organizational culture is critical for the development of knowledge management practices, and the results of our study show pretty good conditions for a future implementation of new models of managerial processes. Thus, the specialists in the libraries surveyed considered that the values promoted by their organizational culture in their institution were performance, professionalism, efficiency (21%); teamwork, communication, competition (12%); and innovation (5%). With most of the participants in this study familiar with the knowledge management process and open to the idea of knowledge sharing (89%) and with many of them characterizing the managerial style in their organizations as being one that creates a

stimulating climate (38%), we consider that the next step in the development strategy of these libraries should be the effective implementation of the knowledge management function. Our research has shown that there is a likelihood that implementation of the knowledge management function in Romanian academic libraries will lead to an increase of these organizations' abilities to learn, identify and use knowledge from internal and external sources in their processes and activities, the generation of new knowledge and the development of new procedures and practices for the optimisation of knowledge sharing and integration in these organizations.

Starting from the situation of these large Romanian academic libraries, specifically the conditions that existed in these institutions in addition to experiences from other institutions and countries identified in a review of the literature, in 2006 we designed a strategic model (8) based on five fundamental elements which should be the starting point for implementation of knowledge management in the Romanian academic libraries.

Following a study conducted in 2004, T. White (9) noted that resources and users, in fact the practical knowledge of the organization, form a model for the library "know-how" that is found in the minds of library staff and is embedded in working practices and in their culture. She drew attention to some risk (difficulty to capture and manage knowledge in large libraries, difficulty of integrating the knowledge management strategy in the existing strategy of the organization, staff fear of sharing their knowledge with colleagues) and benefit (knowledge of experienced personnel is maintained within the organization, a better understanding of user's requirements through evaluation of the services and improvements, an opportunity to see the specialists in library not only service-oriented, but also value-oriented) factors that must be considered before implementing knowledge management in a library.

Another study regarding library specialists' views of knowledge management and its incorporation into library practice was conducted by M. Roknuzzaman and K. Umemoto (10) in 2009. The results of their study showed that the ways of knowing and understanding of knowledge management concepts were varied among the library specialists from different countries and that most of them focused on a limited perception of knowledge management for its incorporation in the library activity. Among the reasons for responding to knowledge management there can be mentioned increased value of knowledge in the knowledge economy, library itself is a knowledge-based organization, opportunities for improved library practices. Among the problems identified by the study regarding incorporation of knowledge management in the library's activity we

mention: reluctance of the library practitioners, misunderstanding of knowledge management concepts, lack of resources, lack of collaboration etc. The authors of the study suggest that “library practitioners need to broaden their understanding, change their traditional mindset, and to apply a holistic approach of knowledge management system design and library practice, focusing on both explicit and tacit knowledge.” (11)

In what concerns implementation of knowledge management in library practice, in many libraries and information services throughout the world such projects have been developed. It is noteworthy that the approaches to knowledge management in library are varied (12), from knowledge management projects in relation to a shared cataloguing system in Japanese academic libraries, to team-based projects to develop and introduce new tools for capturing, managing and using informal and tacit knowledge of reference librarians, to a project on a knowledge management system involving an institutional repository for digital intellectual assets, to a knowledge sharing project aimed at establishing a centre for learning resources organized as a workshop for learning or to a project consisting in the replacement of the intranet with an internal wiki followed by a knowledge audit for making use of hidden staff talent.

Identification and organization of internal and external, tacit and explicit knowledge necessary for the daily activity, development of tools and methods of access to knowledge and for selecting the knowledge sources, development and implementation of classification systems are just some of the areas where knowledge management can support the activity in libraries, can provide more value to libraries and information services and can prove its importance in terms of communication, knowledge sharing in these organizations etc. These are also possible areas where knowledge management projects can be developed. Clearly, the process of knowledge management applied in libraries improves their activity.

Knowledge management leads to increased use of organizational knowledge. And through a number of initiatives involving the creation of knowledge management systems, activities such as creation, dissemination and application of knowledge can be supported in libraries, and they better fulfill their mission to the community and meet users’ needs.

In academic libraries, knowledge management proves its usefulness not only in the context of the growing volume of information available, but also in the context of the changes in the higher education. The processes of knowledge generation and harnessing are enhanced by knowledge management systems.

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